

GODDESS OF HEARTS



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KINGDOM OF FAIRYTALES ALICE IN WONDERLAND BOOK

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KINGDOM OF FAIRYTALES

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2ND SEPTEMBER



The marching Hearts pounded the cobblestones, deafening as they surged forward, the sharp edges of their spears pointing toward the crowd. Screams pierced the night, as people surged backward, crushing each other. Raven pushed me behind him. He grabbed the cane he'd been carrying and brandished its metal tip at the advancing Hearts like a sword.

I patted myself down. Did I have anything to use as a weapon?

"Go to the middle of the crowd. You'll be safer there," Raven ordered. Then he yelled out: "Vampires to the front!" I saw a number of pale-faced, well-dressed men and women appear to make a wall, taking the brunt of the initial attack.

I looked behind me. People were screaming and pushing each other, trying to get away.

The Hearts surrounded us in a circle. The vampires might hold them back for a short period, but there were too many of them. In the open central marketplace, there was nowhere to hide.

Beside me, several other men were brandishing their canes, too. A woman swung her folded parasol, and another held a high-heeled shoe in front of her so that the spike pointed out. Another lady swung a long necklace, with a large jewel pendant, like a ball and chain. As I watched her, I had an idea. I took out the pocket watch and swung it around in front of me—it was better than nothing.

I looked up at the Pinnacle clock. The scaffolding that the workers had put up was still there, along with the ladders that the workers used to make it to the higher levels.

“The ladder,” I pointed, yelling at the people around me. “Quick!”

Instead of using it to escape, a man with a scar down one side of his face pulled the ladder from where it was fixed to the scaffold and broke it across his knee. He broke it in a few more places and passed around wooden stakes as makeshift weapons.

Another scream sounded as the Hearts charged again. Several bodies were lying on the ground, blood seeping from their bellies. I scanned the place where Raven had been, unable to breathe as I saw him striking a Seven of Hearts over and over again with his cane, knocking aside the spear that it was jabbing at him.

A wooden stake, splintered at one end, was pushed into my hand by the man with the scar down his face. “Protect yourself.”

I nodded, gripping the stake in one hand and my pocket watch in the other. I scanned the area again for the others. Across the crowd, flames flew from Gaia’s fingertips. Genie fought beside her, and he must have disarmed one of the Hearts because now he used its spear as his own. Close to them, Alice and Wit were both crouched on the ground. I started toward them, then Alice sent something flying. Wit was digging up the cobblestones with his cane, and Alice was pulling up the loose stones and pelting them at the advancing Hearts.

On the other side, I saw the four men who had come first to Raven’s house the other night. Although Gaia had told them that we’d hoped to have no violence, they’d come prepared anyway, because all of them were fighting with their batons.

Several beautiful ladies had hitched up their skirts and were using knives they’d concealed in their garters to defend themselves. Others threw shoes or jabbed at their attackers with the pointy end of elaborate headdresses. Their perfect faces were pulled into expressions of terror, anger, and grim determination.

A woman, whose face was badly scarred by the pox, swung a stone, striking a Heart in the back of the head as it tried to attack Pearl.

I put a hand over my mouth as I saw my sister, almost skewered by a Four of Hearts. My throat closed up, as the Heart crumpled, falling to the ground at Pearl’s feet.

Pearl stared at the Four of Hearts, then at the woman who had saved her. A look of astonishment passed over her face; she pulled the woman into an embrace, whispering something in her ear.

The woman pushed Pearl away, bending down to pick up the spear that the Four of Hearts had dropped when it fell. She pushed it into Pearl's hands and pointed. Pearl's look of astonishment, became determination. She and the pox-marked woman let out a scream as they charged a Heart together, holding their weapons aloft.

"Watch out!"

The scream alerted me just in time. I swung around to see a Ten of Hearts lunge at me. At the last moment, I stepped aside, and the spear missed me by a fraction. Then Chesh was next to me, his teeth bared. He leaped on the back of the Heart, grabbing it around its neck.

I rushed forward to help Chesh, raising my wooden stake to use it like a baton and brought it down hard on the Heart's chest plate. It made a hollow sound that echoed through the square, but the impact didn't appear to hurt it. I raised my arm again, bringing the stake down on the Heart, again and again.

Chesh was banging the Heart on the metal helmet over its robotic head. Then he reached forward to cover its eyes with his hand. The Heart stumbled, as though disoriented, then it spun, trying to dislodge Chesh from its back.

As it spun, it's arm knocked me to the ground and I went flying backward, hitting the back of my head on the cobblestones.

I blinked, seeing double for a moment. Then I scrambled to my knees, just in time to see the Ten of Hearts jab the point of its spear over its shoulder, skewering Chesh through the shoulder.

"No!" I jumped to my feet, picking up the wooden stake and rushed at the Ten of Hearts as Chesh fell to the ground. The Heart pulled the spear from Chesh's shoulder, making him scream in pain again as he curled up in the fetal position, clutching his shoulder.

I rammed into the front of the Heart before it had the chance to whirl its spear around to fight me off. The force of the impact of my body against the Ten knocked it backward, sending it sprawling on the cobblestones. For a moment, it was like a beetle on its back, waving its arms and legs in the air.

I leaped onto it, hitting it with the stake in my hand. It jabbed at me with its spear, but this time, I grabbed the spear in my spare hand and pulled. The Heart lost control of the spear, and I snapped it in half, wedging a splintered end into the visor of its helmet.

Sparks flew, and the Ten of Hearts jerked, then went still.

I paused, panting as I stared down at the Heart. Slowly, I slipped off the square plate of its body and banged it over the head once more with my stake, for good measure. Then I spun around to see Chesh.

He'd disappeared.

I scanned the area, but there was no sign of him. There were lots of little battles, people fighting against Hearts. The Hearts no longer hemmed us in, though, and as I looked around, I saw the battles were uneven—with two or more people fighting each Heart.

Around the edge, where the Hearts had formed a perimeter, now, the city guards had arrived—apparently summoned by the action—and were fighting alongside the vampires. Beautiful and unbeautiful were fighting alongside each other with vampires among them.

I grabbed a spear lying on the ground and gripped my wooden stake in the other. I rushed to join the group battling the remaining Hearts, pushing them away from the center of the city.

Raven was with the group, and the knot in my stomach loosened a little to see he was unhurt. Then, I noticed Alice among them too, still holding a chipped cobblestone in her hand, and she was yelling orders at the guards.

"Drive them all the way to the gate," she commanded. "Take Twelfth Avenue, drive them out of the city, then close the gates."

I ran past, coming to stand alongside Raven. He glanced at me as he confronted a Heart, jabbing at it with his cane.

"Drive the cane through its visor," I yelled over the noise. "It'll drop like a stone."

Raven glanced at me again, then did as I'd said. The Heart fell backward, slamming to the ground, a shower of sparks coming from its mechanical eye sockets.

Raven grinned at the sight, then glanced at me.

"I thought I told you to get behind me," he said.

I grinned and stood next to him, jabbing at another Heart with my spear. "I've never been very good at doing what I'm told."

Raven and I stood, shoulder-to-shoulder, both brandishing our weapons in front of us, slowly advancing on the Hearts to force them backward along Twelfth Avenue.

The Hearts drew back to attack again, as though they'd been programmed to go only forward.

Suddenly, the remaining Hearts suddenly went completely still.

I blinked, looking sideways at Raven, who shrugged.

The remaining Hearts turned, in unison, and started marching down Twelfth Avenue toward the perimeter wall. They fell into straight rows, and with their footsteps sounding in time, the Heart army left the city as they had arrived.



“Close the gates,” Alice ordered. Her voice was commanding, and she stood erect with her head held high, but her hands shook, and the pallor of her skin betrayed her shock and exhaustion.

It took ten of the city guards, lending their body weight to push each gate closed. The metal squealed on its rusted hinges as the gates protested being moved.

I struggled against the urge to put my hands over my ears as the gates groaned, then finally closed with a *thud*. As soon as the gates were firmly shut, Alice strode forward, pulling out a chain hidden under her shirt. She slipped the chain over her head, then held up a large brass key.

A guard rushed forward with a ladder, offering to take the key from her, but Alice resolutely shook her head. Instead, he held the ladder as Alice climbed the rungs.

When she reached the top, she pushed the large key into the keyhole. With a *click*, the gates were locked. Alice sagged against the metal of the gates, then started to make her way back down the ladder. She took each rung much more slowly than she had done on the way up.

When she reached the ground again, her hands were shaking.

“Mother?” I walked towards her, aware of Raven following closely behind me. I reached out to take his hand as I walked, reaching out to Alice with the other. “Are you alright?”

Alice pushed a lock of grey-blond hair out of her eyes. She didn’t answer but turned to Captain Walsh.

“I want guards posted at every watch along the wall. If those Hearts come anywhere near this gate, I want to know.”

Captain Walsh bowed to her. “As you command, Madam President.”

He hurried off to carry out her orders, and I moved toward her. Alice held up a hand, then closed her eyes, shaking her head. She was on the edge

of breaking down.

“Come, Mother. Let’s get out of here.”

I put an arm around her waist, coaxing her back down the avenue and away from the scrutiny of those who had helped drive the Hearts out of the city, and those who had come to watch as they’d marched out of the gates of their own will.

“Wit was setting up an area to treat the wounded,” Alice said, her voice breathless. “I should go to him.”

“You should sit down,” I murmured. “Take a moment.”

“My people need me,” Alice said. The steel in her voice returned, and I knew there was no point fighting her.

A slight glow appeared above the buildings in the eastern sky as a new day dawned. My fingers entwined tighter between Raven’s, as I put one arm around Alice’s waist.

“We’ll go together, then.”



The sky was lightening as we walked back down Twelfth Avenue. The avenue was quiet—not unusual for this time of day—but there was an eerie quality to the quiet that made my chest tighten with unease. The lamplighters were out to extinguish the street lamps as the morning dawned, though the sun hadn’t yet popped into the sky. It wouldn’t be long, though. I looked at Raven.

“Don’t you need to go home?” I whispered.

Raven looked up at the sky, frowning. “Soon, yes.”

Apprehension twisted in my stomach as I looked at the glow above the buildings. “What happens if you get caught out?”

“Then I’ll be sorry, I wasn’t more careful,” he replied, but he gave my hand a squeeze.

Approaching the center of the city, we saw the first stretchers carrying the injured. Raven stopped a man with a false leg, at the head of a stretcher.

“Where are they taking them?” he asked.

The man didn’t stop as he replied. “Dr. Lapin’s ordered that the worst of the injured be taken to the hospital for treatment. I’m taking this one there

—but I don't know if there will be enough beds. Those with less serious injuries are being treated where they lie on the cobblestones.”

I thought immediately of Chesh—were his injuries so severe that he'd been taken to hospital, or was he one of those left to languish on the cobblestones? And what of Pearl? Of Gaia and Genie? What had happened to them?

Raven nodded. “Where is Dr. Lapin?”

“Still under the Pinnacle clock,” the man replied, turning his back to us as he continued limping on his way.

“Wait!” Raven called out, and the man stopped. “If there aren't enough beds, take the injured to this address.” Raven pulled out a calling card and tucked it into the pocket of the man's coat. “There's plenty of room. Dr. Lapin will attend to him there, directly.”

I stared at Raven, suddenly appreciating his calm but authoritative demeanor. It was easy to imagine this man taking charge of an underground movement helping the people living in the tunnels, and those vampires starving for lack of blood stocks. A natural leader.

“We need to see Wit,” Alice said, straightening. She looked slightly less pale in the rosy morning light, or perhaps she was recovering from the shock of the night.

We continued down Twelfth Avenue and into the city center. As the avenue widened and the circular marketplace came into view, I gasped at the sight. Dozens, perhaps hundreds, of people were laid out on the ground. Others knelt by their sides, cradling heads in their laps or grasping hands as though holding onto them for dear life. The sounds of pain filled the air.

So many injured. And these were the ones deemed not serious enough to be taken to the hospital.

“There he is!” Alice spotted Wit almost immediately, and she let go of my hand as she strode over to see him. Raven and I followed closely behind, stepping between the people lying on the ground.

A smile spread across Wit's face as Alice walked up to him. “You're alright, my dear,” he said and reached out to grab her hands, pulling her towards him.

“You are in your element, I see,” Alice replied. “We saw some being stretchered to the hospital.”

“The doctors there can tend to the worst of the wounds,” Wit said, the smile slipping from his face. “The hospital can take no more, though, and

these people require attention too.”

“I’ve ordered for the overflow from the hospital to be taken to my house,” Raven said. “Take these there too—as many as need a bed. The superficial wounds can be tended in place,” Raven looked around doubtfully. “But these injured look like they need more than just a few kind words.”

Wit nodded. “These aren’t the worst of them, but I’m afraid their wounds will get infected without proper care, cleaning and bandages. I’ll take up your offer, Mr. Cappello. If you can arrange for the transportation of these injured, I’ll attend to them there.”

Raven nodded. “I’ll get started.” He looked at me, as though he was about to say something, but I shook my head.

“No need to explain,” I said. “I’ll be along when I can, but...” I looked up at the sky again, then gave Raven a pointed look. “Don’t you need to get inside?”

Raven frowned, glancing towards the horizon. “Yes,” he whispered. “But I can’t leave without helping. I’ll be careful. I’ll take the tunnels.”

Raven went to leave, taking a look around, then he stopped. “These people look like they’ve lost a lot of blood.”

“Most have. The worst are at the hospital, as I said. The hospital supplies are running low because of the blood bank shortages. There won’t be enough blood for everyone that needs it.”

Raven glanced at me, then at Alice, before giving Wit a wry smile. “I know a guy. Perhaps he can sort out a solution to the blood problem.” He walked away, calling out to a scarred man that I recognized from the tunnels, starting to give instructions.

“What can I do?” Alice asked Wit, bringing me back to their conversation. “Each of these people fought to protect our city. I want to do something to help them.”

Wit put an arm around her shoulders, drawing Alice close to him. “Walk among them. Thank them. Notice them. It will make all the difference.

Alice gave him a small smile before moving away to bend over the first woman she came across. It was the pox-marked woman who had saved Pearl’s life. I startled to see Pearl sitting next to her, holding her hand.

“Mother!” Pearl exclaimed. As she looked up at Alice, I saw the tears staining her face. “This brave woman is Mary Ann. She saved my life.”

Mother knelt down and took Pearl's face in her hands, examining her for any injuries. Pearl shook her off.

"I'm fine, Mother. It's Mary Ann. She won't stay awake."

"I've got this, Mother," I said. "You need to see to the others too."

Mother nodded, glanced once more at Pearl, and kissed her on the top of the head before walking away to speak with the other injured.

I looked down at Mary Ann, noticing a trail of blood that ran from her eyebrow to her chin. I knelt down next to her, lay one hand on her shoulder, and held a hand out to Pearl.

"Was she hit in the head by one of the Hearts?"

As the words came out of my mouth, I noticed a pool of blood underneath Mary-Ann's leg. I bent over to see better, pulling the threadbare and now blood-stained fabric of her skirts aside for a better look.

Pearl was shaking her head. "I think she's going to die. I don't know what to do."

I put my hand on Pearl's cheek, looking up at her. "There's a place where they can take her so that she'll get the medical attention she needs."

"The hospital?" Pearl asked. "But they don't have any more beds. I heard someone else say so."

"Not the hospital. Somewhere else. I'll arrange for someone to move her. Make sure you go with her—she'll want to see a familiar face when she wakes up."

Pearl's eyes widened, and for a moment, I thought she might refuse, not wanting to go to a place where there might be sick, unsightly people. Then Pearl looked down at Mary Ann, swallowed, then nodded.

I got up and hurried towards one of the men who had returned with a stretcher, stepping carefully between the people.

"Excuse me," I waved at him. "There's a woman over here. She's lost a lot of blood."

"I'm not taking anyone to the hospital. It's full—"

"I know," I interrupted. "There's a house..." I passed the man Raven's calling card with his address on it. "I need you to take her to that address. Dr. Lapin is seeing patients there, and I believe there is room for as many as can't be accommodated in the hospital."

His eyes lit up. "That's good news, miss. Shall I spread the word?"

"Please do," I said, then pointed out Mary Ann and Pearl. "This is the woman. She needs to be moved there as soon as possible."

I waited a moment until I was sure that Mary Ann was safely on the stretcher, before moving through the bodies, searching their faces. Everywhere I looked, I saw the bloodstains on their bodies, the pain etched into their features, the worry on the faces of the loved ones clutching their hands—the dark legacy of the attack of the Hearts.

So much pain. So much blood. So much destruction. But I couldn't stop to help anyone in particular. I was driven to search the crowd for one face in particular.

Chesh.

My throat tightened. I should have searched for him when he was first injured, but I'd been distracted by the fight to repel the Hearts. I took a ragged breath. What if he hadn't made it?

That thought jolted my mind into gear. How many people hadn't made it? How many had perished defending Melfall from attack? How many had died in the streets because I had encouraged them to come out of their homes in the tunnels? How many would be alive today if we had never thought of the *Big Night Out*?

I put my hand over my mouth as tears sprang to my eyes. We'd wanted to change The Forge, and we'd certainly accomplished that vision, I thought bitterly. Tonight would go down in the history books as a night to be remembered—but not for the reasons we'd hoped.

I backed up, staring at all of the people who were injured because of me. Stepping backward, I almost tripped over another person lying on the cobblestones.

"I'm sorry, I'm so sorry," I said, murmuring the words over and over again. I turned and moved away, but everywhere I looked, I could see evidence of the destruction the Hearts had brought on our city—the injuries, the torn-up cobblestones, the broken scaffolding torn apart to use as weapons, the shocked and sobbing people who couldn't believe it had happened. Tears welled in my eyes, making the world around me a blur.

I walked straight into a woman wearing a red dress, but I couldn't see her features through my tears, even as I glanced at her face.

"I'm sorry, I'm so—"

"Ivy." The woman put her hands on my shoulders and gave me a little shake.

I blinked away the tears that burned my eyes. Gaia was standing there, looking at me with concern. "Are you alright?"

I sniffed, the tears streaming down my cheeks. “Am *I* alright?” I asked, sounding hysterical. I swept an arm around me. “I’m unharmed, but what about them?”

Gaia frowned, then pulled me over to a small space directly underneath the clocktower.

“You’re not alright.”

I shook my head. “I’m not injured. I’m looking for Chesh. What if he didn’t make it? What if—”

“He did make it. He’s fine. He’s in the hospital.”

My eyes opened wide. “He’s alive?”

Gaia tilted her head to the side. “He had a serious injury to his shoulder, but, yes, he’s alive, and he will heal.”

I let out a sigh and let my head fall forward so that my chin rested almost against my chest. Then I noticed Genie wasn’t with Gaia.

“What about—?”

“Genie is alright, too.” Gaia smiled. “Or he will be with some care and attention. I left my phoenix there—he has magical healing powers, you know. He’ll be in his element in the hospital, though I expect I’ll find him in a pile of ashes when I return.” Gaia squeezed my arm. “Thank you for asking after Genie’s welfare. That means a lot to me.”

“You’re in love with him,” I said, more of a statement than a question.

“Of course,” Gaia answered. “It’s obvious, isn’t it?”

I paused, wondering how to phrase the question that had hovered on the edge of my thoughts since I’d known about Gaia and Genie’s relationship.

“Do your parents approve?” I asked. “I mean the King and Queen—the people who raised you.”

Gaia put an arm around my shoulders. “Yes, I still think of them as my parents.” Then she frowned slightly. “Why do you ask whether they approve?”

I shrugged. “He just doesn’t seem quite the type for...forgive me, but you’re a princess. He doesn’t look like a prince.”

Gaia smiled sadly. “My father wasn’t a prince when my mother married him. He was an orphaned street urchin and a mischievous one, at that. Still, they fell in love and got married, and he was a good ruler.”

“Was?”

“Until he lost his memory and went back to living on the streets like the orphan he’d started out as.” Gaia sighed. “They married for love. I don’t

think they'd stop me from doing the same." She looked sideways at me. "Sometimes, the person who is the perfect match for our hearts isn't the person that our parents—or our kingdoms—would choose for us."

I nodded my head, then leaned my head against Gaia's shoulder, feeling suddenly exhausted. "I don't think anyone would approve of my stepping out with Raven. Last night made that perfectly obvious."

"You were having lots of fun with him, when I saw you," Gaia replied. "You two danced like there was nobody else in the world."

"There wasn't—not then, but..."

"But then those Hearts arrived and ruined it all?"

I ran a hand over my cheek and wiped away the tears. The mention of the Hearts brought back a thought that had been niggling at me since Alice locked the gate shut.

"Why did they do that, do you think? The Hearts, I mean."

"I've been wondering that too. It doesn't make sense, does it?" Gaia replied.

"Unless they're being controlled by someone else," I continued, thinking aloud. "At the end, when they suddenly stopped fighting, they just turned and marched straight out of the gates. As though someone had given them an order and they were just following it."

I frowned, looking at the people laid out over the cobblestones again, as another thought struck me.

"Where are they?" I asked, getting to my feet. "The Hearts that fell? They're gone."

Gaia got to her feet beside me. "The Hearts that could still move joined the others who were retreating. Those that couldn't move were dragged by the uninjured people and thrown over the wall after them. Nobody wanted any remains of them inside the walls."

I nodded, hesitating a moment as a thought nagged at me. Something that had happened during the fight. Then I remembered with a jerk.

"I saw you shooting fire from your fingertips, again," I said, astonished once again. "How do you do it?"

Gaia smiled. "I was wondering when you might ask more about my magic."

"Is it really magic?"

"Fire magic. It's one of the gifts my parents left me—left to all of us siblings, I suppose." Gaia winked. "You, too."

I stared at her, startled. "Magic? Me?"

"Don't you wonder about your affinity for watches and machines?"

I blinked, frozen into place as my mind whirled with this information. Her meaning dawned on me. Gaia arched her eyebrows and nodded her head. Other questions started to form in my mind, but a wave of weariness washed over me. I knew I should visit Chesh, or help with the injured, or do something, but the scene before me suddenly swam before my eyes, and I almost stumbled.

Gaia clung to my arm. "I need some sleep. You do too."

"You're not going to the hospital?"

Gaia shook her head. "Genie will be well looked after there, and my phoenix will watch over him. He'll only scold me for not looking after myself if I go to see him now. Come, let's get some sleep. We'll be needed later, I'm sure of that."

3RD SEPTEMBER



I sank down in the chair next to Chesh, who was tucked into a hospital bed, sleeping. His curly blonde hair was sticking out, laid out on the crisp, white pillow like curly rays of sunshine—or perhaps the mane of a lion. There were fresh bandages on his shoulder, the same crisp white as the sheets on his bed. His face was pale, and there were dark smudges under his eyes. His expression was peaceful in sleep, his mouth slack, and I wished for the smile that he had so often turned on me.

He'd told me he loved me. Twice.

How had I not seen it before?

Ever since I'd told him about meeting Raven, Chesh had been acting differently—strangely. I realized now that it was jealousy and an over-protective nature that had made him react so badly. I sat very still, in a state of conflict. I wanted to make sure he was alright, and I wanted to patch up our friendship, but I didn't want to drive a wedge even further between us.

Right now, in this in-between state, we could still be friends. If I said the wrong thing, we might never be friends again.

I sighed, reaching over to take his hand, stroking his skin with the pad of my thumb.

"Chesh," I whispered. "Get better. Then we'll make sure everything else is alright."

He stirred at my words, slowly rising to consciousness. He blinked, staring around the room before he turned his head slightly to settle on me.

"Ivy," he said, a sense of weary surprise in his voice. He shifted in bed to turn his body toward me and winced with the movement. To avoid the

need for him to move any more, I stood to lean over him.

“You’re hurt,” I said.

“Yes, I’ve just remembered that,” Chesh replied, sinking back on the pillows. “My shoulder.”

“How is it?”

“There’s a big hole in it,” Chesh said with a grin. “It hurts.”

I chuckled.

“You were very brave,” I said, remembering how he’d leapt on the back of that Heart to protect me. “Thank you.”

Chesh smiled briefly, closing his eyes for a moment, as though the effort of speaking was costing him energy.

“Do you want me to go?”

“No.” Chesh’s eyes flew open again. “You’re not hurt?”

I shook my head. “I’m fine. I was lucky to have such a great friend nearby when I needed him.”

Chesh closed his eyes again, a smile on his face. Then he frowned, opening his eyes again. “I’m sorry, Ivy.”

“We don’t have to talk about it now.” I patted his hand.

Chesh stared up at the ceiling. “I spent all day yesterday in pain, in and out of sleep, and all I could think of was the look on your face when I interrupted your dinner and punched your date in the face. I just wanted...”

His eyes flickered over to me, then he went back to staring at the ceiling. “I should have told you before. Years ago. You were never like other girls. I tried making you jealous, but you never took the bait. Then I thought that if I was your friend, in time, you would come to love me, the way I love you.”

Chesh swallowed. I sat very still, saying nothing, my hands clasped in my lap. A lump formed in my throat. The words had been said, and they couldn’t be taken back. Chesh needed an answer, and I needed to set my friend free.

“You don’t love me, do you?” Chesh looked me in the eye.

“You’re my best friend,” I whispered, and a heavy, uncomfortable feeling settled in my stomach. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath, summoning my courage. “But no, I don’t love you. Not the way you want me to.”

Chesh sighed, and it seemed as though his body sank back into the mattress. He closed his eyes, and the smile slipped from his face again.

“I’m sorry, Chesh,” I said. “I wish—”

“Me, too,” Chesh replied. He lifted his hand, reaching out for mine. I reached forward to clasp it. I held him for a moment before he withdrew. “I think it might be best for you to go.”

Tears prickled my eyes. This was it—the end of our friendship. I pressed my lips together, trying to hold my emotions in check.

“I just need some time, Ivy,” Chesh said. “Seeing you every day—seeing you with *him*—it’s too hard. I’m not saying we can’t be friends, in time. I just...”

I stood up, nodding my head. “I know. I hope your shoulder heals quickly, and you get out of this hospital bed as quickly as you can. Then, when you’re ready, you know where I live. I’d like to see you.”

“Goodbye, Ivy.”

I nodded and walked out, stopping in the doorway to glance back at Chesh, who was staring at the ceiling with a pained look on his face. I knew it had nothing to do with his shoulder.



I walked slowly down the hospital hallway, feeling as though I was floating along. The doctors and nurses rushed around me, like water flowing around a rock. People gathered in the doorways to hospital rooms, hovering around their injured family members.

I felt adrift, still seeing Chesh’s grieved expression as I left the room and wondering if I would ever find the same easy friendship with him again. Perhaps, before I’d met Raven, I could have made it work with Chesh. Rationally, we had the same interests, the same sense of humor, and we got along well. We should have made a good match.

In my heart, though, I knew it wasn’t love. Now that I’d met Raven, I knew that I couldn’t pretend to be in love with Chesh when I wasn’t.

I rounded a corner, making my way slowly towards the exit.

“Ivy?”

I looked up to see Gaia coming towards me. She had a light shawl wrapped around her shoulders, and she looked tired and drawn.

“Are you alright?” I asked.

Gaia smiled. "I'm not hurt. I've just spent too much time in this place over the last couple of days."

"Is Genie alright?"

Gaia nodded. "He's sent me away. He said he's disturbing my rest, and I should go home to get some sleep. Besides, my phoenix is there. He won't let anything happen to Genie." She yawned. "I can't say he's wrong. I know I should get some rest, but I can't help fussing over him. I'm lucky he's alive, really. Everyone is—it's a miracle that nobody died."

"Nobody died?" I asked. "Are you sure?"

"I've been asking those who brought the patients to the hospital, and I've checked in with the nurse stations. No fatalities."

I thought about the Heart that attacked Chesh. I'd assumed it was trying to kill Chesh, that it was luck that it put a hole in his shoulder instead of his heart. Perhaps, it chose to injure him, instead of going for the kill? But why?

Gaia smiled and put her arm around my shoulder, pulling me toward the exit. "I know that look. Come, tell me what you're puzzling out now—because I'm too tired to work it out on my own, and I've got to go home. Walk with me."

We stepped out into the heat and sunshine of a hot day—the air was clammy and still. I fanned at my face, while Gaia let the shawl drop from her shoulders. We took the couple of steps down from the entrance to the hospital to the street, then turned down Fourth Avenue back in the direction of the President's Palace, where Gaia was now staying, too.

"I was just thinking that it's more than good luck that nobody died."

Gaia blinked. "You think the Hearts didn't mean to kill anyone? I could've sworn when they charged at us with spears that they intended murder."

"Me too," I replied. "Now that I think of it, though, the Heart that injured Chesh had a clear shot at him. He could have put that spear through Chesh's heart and felled him on the spot. Instead, he put the spear through his shoulder and let him live. Maybe that was purposeful."

Gaia was quiet for a moment while she digested that information. "Genie could have been killed too. But he wasn't. I thought it was luck, but maybe you're right."

"If everyone escaped without life-threatening injuries, it has to be more than luck."

“If the Hearts weren’t intending to kill anyone, what were they doing?”

I shrugged. “That’s what’s so hard to understand. Every time I’ve seen a Heart, it hasn’t been wandering aimlessly. It’s been marching somewhere—with purpose. They want something, but what?”

“Or maybe they’re going somewhere?” Gaia suggested.

“Where?” I asked. “And why?”

“They didn’t appear to have a leader,” Gaia said. “But they must have—they were too well coordinated to be acting independently. They must be taking orders from someone.”

I stared into my sister’s golden eyes, knowing they mirrored my own. “You’re right. When they suddenly retreated, it was as though somebody had flicked a switch, and they all just stopped fighting and left, marching at the same pace they’d come. Someone else was in control of them.”

“Have the Hearts harassed the city before?” Gaia asked.

I nodded. “Eighteen years ago—they did the work of the Queen of Hearts. They killed for her, so they’re certainly capable of it.”

“Do you think the Queen of Hearts is controlling them again?”

I rubbed my fingers at my temple. “Raven said he thinks the Queen has returned. After what you said about the things that are happening in the other kingdoms, perhaps... Alice doesn’t believe it—she’s adamant that the Queen is dead, but Raven said she’s a vampire and would have been difficult to kill. If that’s the truth, then she might be in control of the Hearts again. Or, it could be one of her loyal servants. There are still those who are loyal to her in The Forge.” I thought of the Tweedles and wondered whether they could have been responsible for the attack the other night. Without knowing who was behind the attacks, I couldn’t be sure that the Hearts wouldn’t attack again. The question gnawed at me, and I resolved to make some inquiries.

“At least, the Hearts are locked out of the city,” Gaia said. I murmured my agreement as I wondered what they were doing out there. We crossed the street, arm in arm, passing a greengrocer. I blinked as I recognized one of the women from the tunnels the other night, working behind the register—one of the women who had greeted Raven in the street as we’d walked to *The Menagerie*.

The woman smiled as she caught my eye, and raised her hand to greet me, then turned back to serving her customer.

Gaia caught the greeting and leaned toward me. “Apparently, since so many are injured, the unbeautiful citizens have been given opportunities to work that they wouldn’t have had before.” Gaia squeezed my arm. “See? The Forge can change. Not all at once, but we’ve made a difference over these last few days.”

I stared at the woman for a moment before turning away. “I’ve been thinking that if we hadn’t tried to force change, a lot of people would not be lying in the hospital right now.”

Gaia stopped walking abruptly, then turned to me and put a hand on my cheek. “This wasn’t your fault. You’ve helped people to improve their lives. Look at her—she’s not starving in the tunnels, or living off charity. She’s working for a living. A few days ago, it wouldn’t have been possible. And she is only the start—I’m certain of it.”

4TH SEPTEMBER



I walked up the steps of the perimeter wall until I reached the walk that ran all the way around the ramparts. On one side, the city of Melfall spread out, a maze of buildings huddled together around straight avenues, between an interconnecting puzzle of streets and narrow alleys. Once again, I spotted the decorations on top of the roofs all over the city, still moving ceaselessly like cogs in a machine.

I squinted at them—was it my imagination, or were the cogs moving in time to the ticking of the clock? In fact, I had to strain to hear the sound of the ticking. It seemed quieter than it had only days ago.

“Miss Rowntree?”

I turned to see Captain Walsh saluting me.

“Captain Walsh,” I replied, and he dropped his hand, though his posture was still straight and tall.

“Have you come to see our new sculpture garden?”

I blinked at him. “I beg your pardon?”

He chuckled. “Just a little joke, Miss Rowntree. Yesterday, one of the guards mentioned that they were so still; it was like they were statues. Like sculptures—though they’re no work of art, in my opinion.”

“You mean the Hearts are still here?” I exclaimed, then rushed over to the other side of the walk and looked away from the city, towards the rolling hills that stretched out toward the distant horizon. Only, now, the hills were marked by approximately one hundred Hearts standing in rows.

The Captain was right. The Hearts didn’t move. They stood erect and completely still.

“They haven’t moved since President Rowntree locked the gates. Not a single movement from any of them—and my guards have been watching them around the clock since the attack.”

I stared at the Hearts, standing in straight rows in the same formation they’d taken when they marched out of the city.

“What about the broken ones?” I asked, stretching to look directly down to the base of the wall. “I heard they were thrown over?”

“Well, there’s the mystery. The remains of the broken Hearts have disappeared.”

“Disappeared?” I looked at him. “Your guards didn’t see anything?”

Captain Walsh shook his head. “They didn’t, but that doesn’t mean they weren’t looking. The fact is that the wall is long and, even doubled, my guards cannot see everything.”

I clenched my teeth, determined to keep my mouth shut, despite the obvious questions. I looked over the Hearts again, doing a rough count.

“There seem to be more than the number of Hearts who marched out of the gate,” I commented.

Captain Walsh looked out, frowning, and I could see him surveying the Hearts, as though doing some quick calculations of his own.

“Do we know how many Hearts there were to begin with?”

“No, miss. I don’t believe anyone counted,” Captain Walsh responded. His posture straightened and tensed, and he suddenly sounded defensive. “There was quite a lot going on at that time, and most of my guards were patrolling the city streets instead of manning the towers. President’s orders, you know.”

I sighed. “I’m not blaming you or your guards,” I said, trying to sound diplomatic. “I’m just trying to work out where they came from and who sent them.”

Captain Walsh shrugged. “Doesn’t matter now, does it? The city gates are locked, and the Hearts have run out of energy. If that’s what they ran on, to begin with. They don’t seem like much of a threat to me, right now.”

I pressed my lips together. *Not right now, but I’m not counting them out completely.*

His words about the Hearts running out of energy struck me, though, and I stared down at them.

Captain Walsh cleared his throat. I became aware that he had asked me something.

“I beg your pardon, Miss Rowntree, but since you’re here, I wonder whether you might take a tour of the wall and barracks? All of the guards were pulled back from leave to patrol the city on the *Big Night Out*, and since then, they’ve been pulling double shifts to ensure the wall is properly guarded. I expect our President is very busy just at the minute, but people think of you as her representative. It would be helpful for morale if you walked among them for a short time, and thanked them for their efforts.”

I wanted to say no, but couldn’t deny that the city guards had been very helpful in patrolling the *Big Night Out*, then during the Heart attack, and since. I inclined my head in agreement and dutifully followed Captain Walsh to greet the guards.



“What are you doing?”

Gaia sat on the window seat underneath my bedroom window. She’d come to see me in my room after having woken from an afternoon nap. I sat at my table with little cogs and gears spread all over. I was wearing my goggles to magnify the tiny gears as I worked on the pocket watch I was making for Gaia.

“Keeping my hands busy helps me to think,” I replied without meeting her eyes.

“What are you thinking about?” Gaia asked.

“The Hearts.”

“About who is controlling them?”

I nodded. “the Hearts are robots. They have been made to look human, with card armor and helmets, but they aren’t human. They’re programmed.”

I fiddled with one of the tiny round gear wheels with teeth that wouldn’t quite fit into place. The placement had to be perfect, or it wouldn’t connect properly to the other wheels, and the escapement mechanism wouldn’t run properly or keep time. I held my breath as I used a small set of tweezers to fit the wheel into place, but it slipped from my grip. I sighed as I set the wheel down on the table, changed my grip on the tweezers and tried again.

“If they’re programmed, then somebody is in control of their responses.”

“Someone used them to attack the city,” Gaia replied. “We talked about this already.”

“Yes, but the fact that they’re outside the city, still and unresponsive, doesn’t mean they’re no longer a threat. They’re not dead—they’re just waiting for a signal to power up again. While we don’t know who’s controlling them, we don’t know when that might happen.”

“We shouldn’t wait around for an attack to come.”

I shut my eyes and focused on *feeling* the gear into place. I could feel the energy pulsating through my fingers where I held the tiny pieces of the watch. The parts of the watch felt like parts of myself, and I concentrated my mind on *thinking* them into the right place. I heard a *click* as the tiny gear fit into place.

My eyes flew open, and I smiled in triumph before setting the still unfinished watch back on the table. I leaned back to stretch my shoulders. “That’s exactly what I was thinking. We should be ready for it,” I replied, once again, thankful that Gaia and I seemed to be on a similar wavelength when it came to solving problems. It felt so natural to talk through problems with her—as though we’d been doing it for years, rather than less than a week.

The late afternoon light fell over Gaia’s shoulder, setting off her profile with a line of gold, as though she was some sort of goddess. The sun would soon dip beneath the horizon, and I felt a thrill of excitement shoot through me at the notion that it was almost time for me to visit Raven. Part of me scolded myself that I shouldn’t be so excited when the city and its people faced so many problems, but I couldn’t deny the way my heart pounded when I thought about him.

“You are thinking that your new friend might have the answers to this puzzle?” Gaia asked, looking at me from underneath her long eyelashes, with a smirk on her face.

I shrugged one shoulder in mock innocence. “Raven might be able to answer some of my questions. It’s worth a try.”

“I suppose that’s the only reason you’re going to see him?” Gaia teased. “I’m sure it has nothing to do with his handsome face and dashing figure.”

I blushed but knew it was pointless denying it. A thought struck me. “You think Raven is handsome?”

Gaia rolled her eyes. “It doesn’t matter what I think. You think he is handsome. As it happens, I understand the attraction to a man who looks

younger than he is. After all, who can argue with the beauty of youth and the wisdom of age?”

“Is Genie much older than you?” I asked. “He’s not a vampire, too, is he?”

Gaia shook his head. “Not a vampire, but yes, he is somewhat older than me. He’s a genie—but don’t go asking him for wishes. He doesn’t have that magic anymore.” She stood up and walked to the door, giving me a wink as she left. “Don’t stay out too late.”



It was dark by the time I stepped down the ladder and into the tunnels that ran underneath the city. I’d tried the shop first, but Miss Lapin told me that Raven hadn’t been in since the attack. Then, I’d tried his house, but his butler informed me that Raven had not been seen at the residence since turning it into a halfway house. He also mentioned that Raven had not slept since the attack. The butler seemed rushed off his feet, so I hadn’t pressed him for more details, but if Raven hadn’t slept for days, I knew that meant he’d been out of the reach of the sunlight.

That meant there was only one place he could be—the network of tunnels that ran underneath Melfall.

As the lamplighter lit the street lamps, I’d retraced my steps to the place where Raven had first brought me down to the tunnels. I slid open the manhole cover and lowered myself down the ladder and into the darkness.

Somewhere, I could hear the dripping of water. It was cooler down here, but the moisture made it feel just as humid as the surface.

I followed the torchlights along the tunnel, and it wasn’t long before I bumped into the people who had made these tunnels their home. They confirmed my suspicions and led me through the maze of tunnels to find Raven.

I entered a brightly lit room with a map of Melfall pinned to the wall, alongside other papers scribbled with lists of items and names. A number of people were standing around Raven as they looked at something, and they all turned to look at me as I cleared my throat.

Raven’s face lit up with a smile. He wiped his hands on his trousers, which looked uncharacteristically rumpled, and stepped around the table.

The others mumbled something about having “things to do” and scuttled out of the room. Raven didn’t take his eyes off me as they left, and when the last of them left the room, he reached out to put a hand on my cheek.

“Ivy,” he breathed, speaking my name with such longing. He drew me to him, pressed his forehead to mine, and closed his eyes as though in prayer. I curled my fist in his shirt, and we stood like that for a moment, clutching each other, before he bent down to brush a soft kiss to my lips. “I’m sorry, I haven’t come to see you. It’s not because I didn’t want to.”

“Your butler thinks you’ve abandoned your home to make it into a halfway house. He didn’t seem particularly pleased about it.”

The edge of Raven’s mouth curled up in a smile. “The hospital was full. How could I let my house stand empty while the people of this city bled on the streets? The place is too big for me, anyway.”

“He also said you haven’t slept in days.” I raised my eyebrows in mock admonishment.

“I’m a vampire, I don’t need nearly as much sleep as a mortal.” He stroked my cheek. “I couldn’t rest while the people of this city needed help.”

I leaned my ear against his chest as I looked around the room. “What have you been doing? This looks like a base of operations.”

Raven chuckled. “I’ve built up networks over the years, especially since I’ve been working to better the lives of the hidden, and the vampires of this city. It puts me in a unique position to make sure those who suffered blood loss have access to the blood they need for a full recovery.”

“You’re supplying the hospitals now, as well as the vampires?” I looked up at him.

“Since we’ve been unable to get access to the blood banks, vampires have been building up their own stores, paying me for blood that I get from Wit’s patients. Now, they’re donating their stores to the cause.”

“Even though the blood banks are still withholding blood?”

Raven nodded. “I’ve never known my kind to be so charitable, especially toward mortals.”

“You’re the go-between, making sure the donated blood gets to where it’s needed?”

Raven shrugged, though there was a hint of a pleased smile. “Blood, supplies, medicines—I’ve got a network of people and vampires who can

move things around the city. It's useful to have in a time like this. Plus, I've already got a network established to find places to live for people who need one—the hidden are moving out of the tunnels and back to the surface. Now, we're passing along offers of work to those who might be able to step in to cover for those injured in the attacks.”

“I saw an unbeautiful woman yesterday, serving in the front of a shop. Last week, she would never have been hired to serve customers. Things are changing.”

“We have to capitalize on this momentum while there is some goodwill in the city. I can't rest while we have the opportunity to take advantage of this crisis to forge a place for the hidden to be part of society again. If we don't, we risk Melfall going back to the way it used to be. I won't let that happen.”

I smiled up at him, bursting with pride. “Good. Just make sure you look after yourself. I don't want to see you collapsing from exhaustion—it won't do anyone any good.”

Raven chuckled again and brushed a lock of hair from my face. “I've missed you,” he murmured as he leaned down to press a lingering kiss to my lips. I wrapped my arms around his torso, pressing myself against him, as though trying to forge our bodies into one.

When we pulled away from each other, I found myself breathless and blinking in the flickering light of the torches on the damp walls.

“As lovely as it is to see you, Ivy, I have more to do, and I don't want you wandering around the city at night. After the attack, I worry about you.”

“Would your work allow you to walk me home?” I asked, though I didn't want to leave. “We could talk on the way. I did actually come to see you for a reason.”

Raven arched an eyebrow. “Aside from the pleasure of my company?”

It was my turn to chuckle. “Your company is equally alluring,” I replied as Raven motioned for me to follow him out of the room and back into the darkness of the tunnels. He didn't take a torch from the walls, and though I could barely see through the darkness around me, Raven moved with the confidence of someone who could both see and knew where he was going. He took my hand, and I wove my fingers between his, thankful for the contact as I moved blindly through the dark.

“What did you want to ask me?” Raven’s soft voice echoed off the tunnel walls like the sounds of our footsteps.

“I wanted to ask if you have found out anything more about the Hearts and who is controlling them.”

I heard Raven take a deep breath. “No more than guesses. The Hearts used to be controlled by the Queen. I told you that I think she’s back. I don’t have anything to prove it, but that’s still my hunch.”

“We need to disable those Hearts so that the Queen—or whoever is using them to attack the city—can’t use them anymore.”

“Can you do it?” Raven asked.

I bit my lip, hesitating as I remembered what Gaia said about my ‘knack’ before I answered. “I can try.”

5TH SEPTEMBER



“This extraordinary city hall meeting will come to order,”
The town crier’s voice boomed from the front of the large city hall. I stood on my tiptoes in the crowd, stretching to see around the tall feathers on the hat of the woman who stood in front of me. On either side, my shoulders pressed against other people. The chairs had been removed so there was standing room only in the cavernous space

I guessed that had caused some grumbles from those who had arrived first, but now it seemed as though everyone in the entire city was trying to squeeze into one of the few large meeting halls the city offered.

There wasn’t even room to fan my face, and in the warmth of the day and the crush of the room, a wave of heat swept over me.

At the front of the hall, Alice stood on a raised stage, waiting for the moment to speak. This morning, she’d left me a note that she was calling a town meeting, and that I should attend, but she hadn’t told me what it was about.

I could only guess it was about the recent attack on Melfall, but I hadn’t had the chance to speak to her.

In one corner, I noticed a group of vampires with Raven among them. They appeared through a back door and, since the meeting was being held in the middle of the day, I guessed there had to be an opening to one of the tunnels somewhere in the back of the building. I could see Raven looking over the crowd—for me—and I tried to catch his eye, but he didn’t see me before Alice stepped up to the dais.

As she did so, another man stood on the side of the stage, watching her as though she was the only person in the world. Wit put his hands together,

as though he was clapping—or praying—but he didn’t make a sound. I remembered seeing them together at the *Big Night Out*, learning that they had been old friends. By the look in Wit’s eyes, I knew there was more than friendship between them—on his part, at least.

The muttering of the crowd fell to silence as Alice paused, waiting for their attention before she started to address everyone.

“Welcome, citizens of Melfall, and thank you for attending at such short notice. I think you will agree that the events of the last few days warrant immediate action.”

A ripple of a murmur ran through the crowd as people wondered what Alice was going to say. The pre-meeting chatter had converged on the same topic. Some thought she was going to announce special security measures. Others speculated that she knew the origins of the attack. Still others, worried that she was going to announce that she’d made a deal with the Queen of Hearts, to return the throne to the Queen in return for her life and banishment from the kingdom.

Tension knotted my shoulders, and I wished I’d had the chance to speak to Alice before the meeting. While I was confident that she had done no such deal with the Queen of Hearts, it reminded me of Raven’s conviction that the Queen would return.

The woman in front of me moved, and the feathers obscured my vision again. I shifted sideways, too, accidentally stepping on the toes of the man next to me.

“Sorry,” I whispered. Several people shushed me as Alice started talking again.

“There are to be changes to The Forge and to the city of Melfall,” Alice continued, raising her voice over the whispers of the crowd.

The muttering suddenly ceased. Absolute silence fell like a blanket over the crowd.

“A few days ago, a group of people organized an event. I’m sure you have all heard of the *Big Night Out*—an event designed to call attention to the plight of those people who live in this city but have been ignored and forced into hiding because of the way they look.”

“The people who attended the *Big Night Out* risked discrimination and arrest for being on the streets and in venues in flagrant disregard of the aesthetic laws of The Forge.”

Alice paused and looked around. Many of the people who had been at the *Big Night Out* were also here in the crowd. I recognized many faces, including Mr. Thackery and his wife, who were now looking at Alice with a mixture of fear and hope on their faces. Alice's next words could change their lives or condemn them.

"If those people had not risked arrest to attend the *Big Night Out*, the Hearts would have outnumbered us. Without them, the Hearts would have controlled our streets. Our city would have fallen to those heartless beings. Of that, I am sure. Whoever controls the Hearts would be standing in front of you now."

"Instead, the people of this city—young and old, rich and poor, beautiful and," Alice paused. "less beautiful, humans and vampires—we stood together and fought together, to defeat the Hearts and to drive them from Melfall."

The crowd burst into chatter and applause. A small smile tugged at my lips.

"Since the attack, I have watched the citizens of this city rally together—to help the injured, to keep business running while the owners cannot work, to find supplies, to source hospital beds for the injured, to find housing for those without it. All of the citizens of Melfall have worked together—no matter their background, appearance, or income—for the recovery of and betterment of our great city."

"I stand before you to thank you all for your contributions to the life of our city at this time."

People broke into applause, looking around to grin at each other. I could see the pleasure on their faces and the pride that they felt at being part of it. I found myself smiling and clapping along with them. Not because of my part in it, so much, but because I was proud of the people. Yes, I had a hand in getting some of them out of the tunnels and into the streets of Melfall, but the way the people had put their differences aside and fought alongside each other—they had saved themselves, and they deserved to revel in their success.

Alice was smiling too, as she looked around at the crowd. Then she glanced over her shoulder at Wit, who nodded his head once in encouragement. Then Alice turned her attention back to the crowd and held up her hands for silence again.

“Our city cannot go back to the way it was before the attack. We cannot go back to the differences that drove division between us. We cannot go back to the laws that rewarded some and punished others—not for their skills or labor or achievements, but for their appearances.”

I held my breath, clasping my hands in front of my chest as I strained on tiptoes to see Alice.

When she spoke again, her voice was sure and authoritative. “Henceforth, with immediate effect, the aesthetic laws will be repealed. Nobody will be able to refuse service or employment to anyone because of the way they look, nor will licenses to conduct business be refused or revoked for aesthetic reasons.”

A selection of the crowd cheered. Others looked at each other, gobsmacked. A knot formed in my chest as Alice took a deep breath before she continued.

“Furthermore, the aesthetic stipend will be discontinued.”

At Alice’s words, the crowd erupted. There were a few cheers, but just as many people who were shouting. The faces around me ranged from shocked to angry to afraid. I heard snippets of the conversations around me.

“...how am I supposed to support myself now?...”

“...that’s alright for those with another livelihood, but it will force many into poverty...”

“...about time people did more than just stare at mirrors all day...”

“...I’ll be ruined...”

“...my business relies on people receiving the stipend...”

The knot in my chest tightened. I thought of Pearl, knowing she would take the news hard. I looked around, but if she was at the meeting, I didn’t see her. At the back of the room, I glimpsed Gaia, who was nodding and smiling. There was no way of moving through the crowd to get to her, certainly not while the people were so worked up. For a moment, I wondered whether the crowd would surge toward the front, taking power from Alice by force and crushing me in the process.

Alice was holding up her hands again, trying to calm the crowd, but it was having little effect. She glanced back at Wit with a worried look on her face. Wit was frowning, too.

The town crier stepped forward. He thumped his staff on the ground, though the sound was barely audible over the crowd. “Order, order!” he boomed.

“Please, quiet now. Quiet, please,” Alice called out.

“Order! This meeting will come to order!”

“Let the President speak!” It was Raven’s voice that carried over the noise of the crowd. He stepped up to the side of the stage, emanating authority as he stared out over the crowd. From the whispers around me, many citizens knew the role he’d played helping people over the last few days. At his statement, the crowd quietened, though discontent still rippled around the hall.

Alice gave Raven an appreciative look before she continued.

“Thank you, fellow citizens, I know this is a big change. It is a bigger change for some of you than for others. I recognize this. It is for this reason that, while the aesthetic stipend will cease, the city will provide assistance to those who were receiving the stipend to learn new skills and to obtain employment.”

“There will also be assistance and compensation to those who have lost their businesses due to the application of the aesthetic laws. Further assistance will be provided to those who have been living in the city tunnels to find new homes. As you have all come together to save this city, so this city will come together to make sure there is a place for all of you. Nobody will fall through the cracks. Nobody will be left behind. This, I promise you.”

Alice let her words settle. There was silence now—but it was a thoughtful silence, rather than a silence of anticipation or of fear.

The woman in front of me moved, and her hat now completely obscured my view. I looked around me, wondering whether there would be a protest about the loss of an income that was considered to be vital to many of the people present. I’d never anticipated how difficult it would be to take a payment from people who were used to it and believed they deserved it.

Finally, after a long pause, Alice spoke again. “The Forge used to be a kingdom. Now it is a republic. I am not your queen. I am your president. I do not govern by divine right, but because you—the citizens of The Forge—have chosen me to lead you. So, I now declare the meeting open to those who would like to speak—either for or against the change of laws.”

Alice stepped away from the podium and smiled at the crowd.

My throat tightened, and I looked around again. The murmurs of discontent quietened, and people looked around at each other. At the side of

the stage, Raven had stepped down to the ground and was now looking around at the people in the hall with his arms crossed.

There was a long pause, and I wondered who would be the first person to speak. Alice stood on the stage, looking around.

Nobody stepped forward.

Alice visibly sighed with relief and was about to step up to the podium when I heard a series of footsteps clicking over the floorboards.

I strained on my tiptoes to see who was there, but all I could see were bright pink feathers in front of my face.

When the person spoke, though, I didn't need to see. I could have identified that voice anywhere.

"My name is Pearl Rowntree," Pearl's voice sounded small and unsure—something I'd never known Pearl to be. "Our President is my mother. I'm eighteen. I've never worked. I've always lived on the stipend. The decision of our President will take away my livelihood. Honestly, I don't know what I will do without it."

My mouth went dry, and I saw a pained expression on Alice's face. There was a murmur among the crowd as Pearl took a breath. Then, she continued: "A few days ago, if Mother had proposed the abolition of the aesthetic stipend, I would have spoken out against it. Now, I'm standing here to say, I think the President is right."

The crowd around me gasped, then chatter erupted. Towards the other side of the room, someone called for quiet so that we could continue to hear Pearl speak.

"The other night, I was in the center of the dancing when the Hearts attacked. I thought I was going to die."

My throat constricted as I heard the waver in Pearl's voice. "I would have died if it wasn't for the brave actions of a woman—a stranger—but who I now know was a friend I hadn't met yet. Her name is Mary Ann. She's in the hospital, recovering from injuries that she sustained when she helped me fight off that Heart. Before that night, she lived in the tunnels with so many others who couldn't show their faces on the streets. She might not be beautiful enough to receive the stipend, but she is truly the bravest person I have ever met.

"So, the only thing to do now is what our President—my mother—says is right. She's always right, and now is no exception." Pearl cleared her throat. "That's all."

I blinked tears from my eyes as I heard Pearl's footsteps. I imagined her stepping down from the stage. Alice waited a few more moments, but nobody else spoke.

Finally, Alice stepped back to the podium. "I know these are big changes for each of you and for our city. Please know, even if you have not stepped forward to speak now, my doors are open to you if you wish to petition me in the future. We will stand together—I do not intend to leave anyone behind." Alice inclined her head. "Thank you all."



The crowd flowed out of the town hall like a dam that had burst. There was lots of chatter, and most of it was about Alice's proclamation. I heard a few mutterings and musings about how things were going to work, but most people seemed to be curious rather than opposed. Alice's promises not to leave anyone behind seemed to have mollified most of the initial concerns among those people who risked losing their income and livelihood.

As soon as I stepped out onto the cobblestones of the avenue, I looked quickly around for Gaia. Raven, I knew, would have disappeared into the tunnels since the sun was still high in the sky, but Gaia should still be about. The crowd was too thick to find her, and I didn't want to waste time looking when there was no guarantee that I would find her in amongst most of the population of Melfall.

Besides, I'd promised Raven that I was going to find out how the Hearts worked, and disable them, to make sure they could not be used against the city again.

I turned in the direction of the wall and walked briskly along the almost empty streets. Most of the shops and restaurants were closed, as their proprietors had been at the town meeting and hadn't yet reopened. It wasn't long until I was craning my neck to stare up at the stone ramparts of the perimeter wall.

"Miss Rowntree?" Captain Walsh asked as I knocked on the door of the gatehouse.

"I want to see the Hearts," I said, without preamble.

The captain frowned. "Again?"

He hesitated, waiting for me to confirm my request, then sighed and started to lead me up the stone steps set into the wall. I put a hand on his arm to stop him, then I pointed to the gates, now firmly closed.

"I want to go outside," I said. "I need to see the Hearts up close."

Captain Walsh's forehead furrowed as his frown deepened. He started shaking his head emphatically. "No, Miss Rowntree. I'm afraid that's not possible."

"I understand the Hearts are dangerous..." I said, eager to forestall his arguments and change his mind.

"You do not understand, Miss Rowntree," Captain Walsh said. He crossed his arms over his chest. "I cannot comply with your request."

"I understand you want to protect me. You are one of the brave guards of our city," I continued, clasping my hands in front of me as though in prayer.

"It is not possible," he replied with a firm shake of his head.

I held up a finger. "Anything is possible if you're willing to give it a try."

"It is not, miss." Captain Walsh repeated, his voice rising a notch. "You don't understand—"

"No, sir," I interrupted. "It is you who doesn't understand. All I want is to examine the Hearts. I want to see how they work, to disarm them so that they can't threaten us anymore."

Captain Walsh sighed and rubbed at his forehead. "It is not a matter of will, Miss Rowntree. It's not that I am refusing to open the gates. I simply can't do it. The president has the only key. Our city is on lockdown until she orders otherwise."

"Oh," I stared at him for a moment, then looked down at my hands, feeling foolish.

"So, you see, no matter how good your reasons are for needing to leave the city, or examine those dreadful Hearts, I'm afraid I cannot comply with your request."

I sighed, then a thought struck me. "What if the president orders you to open the gates?"

"As long as the president's orders coincide with her giving me the key to open the gates," Captain Walsh gave me a small smile. "Then, I'd be happy to comply. Well... *happy* might be the wrong word, but I would follow my president's orders." He gave me a small bow in what seemed to

be a sort of apology. “I’m sorry I can’t help you on this occasion, Miss Rowntree. Still, we can all feel a little safer that nobody but the president can open the gates. I have faith that she will do no such thing until we can eliminate the menace of the Hearts forever. Those Hearts will stay out there, and we’ll stay in here. Safe.”

I nodded, wondering how we would ever know the Hearts were no longer a threat if we couldn’t study them. I took my leave of Captain Walsh, and, lifting my skirts, I trudged slowly up the stone steps to the top of the wall. A cool breeze ruffled my hair as I stepped out onto the walk. I touched the rough stone, leaning over the edge to look down on the Hearts.

At first glance, it seemed as though nothing had changed. The Hearts stood completely still. The wind rustled the tips of the long grass that grew around their feet, but the Hearts were unmoved.

I tapped my fingers on the stone of the battlements, staring at them, as my thoughts turning instinctively to the puzzle of these Hearts. There were lots of them standing at attention outside the walls. Hundreds of them.

The puzzle still gnawed at me. I couldn’t believe that the Hearts had voluntarily marched out of the city to die.

I sighed again, leaning my elbows on the battlements to prop my chin on my hands. I would find no answers up here. There was nothing for it.

I’d have to speak to Alice.



The shadows were long by the time I made my way home from my visit to the perimeter wall. The fastest way was directly across the circular marketplace of the city center, past the Pinnacle, and under the glare of the ever-watching clock. As I approached the site of the attack, I hesitated, debating taking the longer way around.

The city center was empty—it had been since the night of the attack. It used to be a place where people milled and mingled. Now, most people avoided this place, and anyone who walked through here did so with their eyes focused straight ahead—as though they were afraid of seeing the blood that still stained the cobblestones.

I gritted my teeth, telling myself that there were no ghosts here, only memories. I forced myself to keep walking. To take the quickest way home.

If I was lucky, Alice would be able to see me right away, and I'd have the key to the gates in my hand by morning.

I glanced up at the Pinnacle clock as I strode across the center of the city. I hadn't really intended to look at it, but something caught my eye. I looked up at it again, slowing down until I came to a complete stop.

Something was different about the clock tower. I frowned up at it. What had changed?

I slowly circled the Pinnacle, craning my neck to see. The play of late afternoon light and shadows made it difficult to see clearly, but the clock tower seemed...less intricate somehow. As though someone had removed the gears and inner workings of the clock.

It was still ticking, though—I could hear it clearly.

I put a hand over my eyes to shade from the glare of the late afternoon sun and stared up again. Perhaps the workmen had started working on it once more. But no—the ladder and scaffolding from the bottom level of the clock were still damaged from where people had torn them apart to use the wood as weapons against the Hearts. The workers would have had to fix the scaffolding and the ladder before they could climb up to the upper levels to work on the clock.

I stared, taking a few steps back to get a better look. I stepped into a shadow, where the light wasn't shining straight into my eyes. Within moments, the light dimmed quickly as the sun dipped underneath the horizon. The glare suddenly disappeared.

I stared up, just as the lamplighter started to light the street lamps molded into the shape of Hearts with a flame burning in the center.

The lamplighter moved onto the next lamp, tipping his hat to me as he hummed and moved along. The sound of his lonely tune echoed through the almost empty space. I turned back to the clock, starting to walk again, slowly making my way across the cobblestones towards the President's Palace.

I was on the other side of the market when I glanced at the clock again. It was almost like a compulsion—I'd never been able to find out how the clock worked, and it was another unsolved puzzle in my life.

As I glanced up, I saw some of the gears exposed. I stared. There was something different about the clock. It wasn't that the gears had been taken out of the clock. They had been covered. Some kind of sheeting now covered the inner workings of the giant clock.

It couldn't have been the workers, though, because the scaffolding hadn't been fixed. Unless, with everything else that had happened on the day of the *Big Night Out*, I hadn't noticed the changes.

Was that it? I sighed, rubbing my forehead. I couldn't be sure, but the thought gnawed at me. Why hadn't I noticed the other night?

A hand clapped me on the shoulder, and I sucked in a breath as I whirled around.

Raven stood there, one hand in his pocket, his mouth curled up in a half-smile, and his eyes sparkling as he tipped his hat at me.

"My love," he whispered. "I've missed you."



Raven was still grinning when we approached the gates of the President's Palace.

"It was a good day," I murmured.

"I didn't see you at the town hall," Raven said.

"I was there."

"I know." Raven winked. "I caught a hint of your scent."

I slapped him playfully on the arm. "I don't smell."

"I didn't say you smell," Raven replied, chuckling. "You do have a particular scent, though. It is very pleasant."

"Thank you," I blushed. "I think."

"Things did go well today," Raven agreed. "This marks the beginning of a new era for The Forge."

"I hope so," I said.

"Our president was great today—very convincing. Nobody spoke against her."

"It won't be smooth sailing," I replied, thinking about the muttered comments I'd heard around me.

"No, but we have made progress, and far quicker than I ever imagined we would. I hope we'll move everyone out of the tunnels by the end of the month."

"So long?"

Raven looked sideways at me. "We have to find housing for everyone—affordable housing."

“Mother said the city would help with that.”

Raven nodded. “She did. Still, it takes time.”

The guard at the gate recognized me and opened the gate without a word. Raven followed me to the door, then pulled on my hand to stop me.

“This is where I leave you tonight.”

“You don’t want to come in to see the others?”

Raven smiled. “I would, but I have things to do tonight.”

“Don’t you ever rest?”

Raven shook his head. “I don’t need much rest.”

“Is that how you make so many hats?”

He chuckled, brushing his thumb across my cheek as he inspected the hat I was wearing today. “Yes, although I haven’t much time for it at present. My shop is looking distinctly under-stocked.”

I snorted and rolled my eyes. “Your shop looked cluttered before. Now, it’ll be just right.”

“Speaking of hats,” Raven plucked at the ribbon on the headpiece I was wearing. “This isn’t one of mine.”

A faint blush spread across my cheeks, and I wondered whether Raven could see the color under the flickering lamplights along the drive. “Pearl bought it for me.”

Raven made a non-committal sound. “She surprised me today. I thought she’d be against the change.”

I nodded. “You mean to say your superior senses misjudged her character?” I replied mockingly.

Raven dipped his head, sheepishly, acknowledging my dig at him. “It is rare that I misjudge a person’s character, but I’ll admit,”—Raven met my eye with a sheepish look—“she might not have been the first person I have misjudged recently.”

I gave him a mock-stern look. “As long as you don’t hold fast to your first impressions—”

“You know I don’t.”

“then I suppose you might redeem yourself yet.” I winked at him, then turned serious. “I’ll admit, I was surprised too. I haven’t seen Pearl in a couple of days either. Not since the attack. Though now that I think of it, Alice mentioned that Pearl has been helping to nurse the patients who had been taken to your house to be treated.”

“If Pearl can see beyond her friend’s appearance, then it gives me hope for Melfall,” Raven murmured.

“There’s often more to a person than appearances would have you believe,” I agreed, though I was thinking of the Hearts standing outside the wall. As though they were waiting for something.

“Alice was smart to move on the changes while the attack was still fresh in the people’s minds. I’m going to have to make you a new hat.”

I blinked. “A new hat?”

“Since we’re discussing appearances, I’ll not have you walking around wearing another milliner’s hat.” He grinned, then pressed a kiss on my lips, then on my forehead. As he pulled away, Mr. Hopewell opened the door.

“Miss Rowntree?” he said. “Welcome home. Dinner has been served, but I’ll have someone bring a tray to your room.”

Raven brought my hand to his lips and pressed a kiss to my knuckles. “Good night, Miss Rowntree. I will see you again soon.”

6TH SEPTEMBER



A serving girl, Rose, stood in the hall, holding out a silver tray laden with a single cup and saucer, and a number of sweet pastries. Alice took the cup of coffee, acknowledging Rose with a nod and taking a quick sip as her ladies maid, Nancy, fetched her light coat and hat. Alice winced as the hot liquid scalded her lips.

“Hurry, Nancy, I’m already late.”

“You haven’t even had time to sit down for a proper breakfast, Madam President,” Nancy protested. “Surely, there is time for a pastry?” Nancy had served Alice since she first became President of The Forge. An older woman, her hair almost completely white, Nancy sometimes acted more like a mother than a maid. “Eating while standing gives one terrible indigestion, you know.”

“Thank you for your concern, Nancy, but this is all I have time for today,” Alice replied, setting the half-empty coffee cup back down on the tray. She nodded to Rose, who bobbed a curtsy, then withdrew into the kitchens. “I’ll be out all day, but I hope to be home for dinner.”

“You work too hard, Madam President,” Nancy scolded. She tucked a stray lock of hair into Alice’s hat as she pursed her lips. Then she relented. “I’ll be sure to ask cook to have a hearty dinner ready for you when you return.”

Alice gave Nancy a grateful smile. She glanced in the hallway mirror to check her appearance, then spun around and marched to the door. Mr. Hopewell, the butler, opened the door on cue so that Alice didn’t even have to break stride as she stepped outside.

“Wait, Mother!” I said, rushing down the hallway after her. “I need to speak to you.”

“I’m running late, Ivy,” Alice replied, half-turning to glance at me, her lips pursed. “I’m speaking with the grandmasters of the United Guilds about taking on additional apprentices and using their skills to rebuild the city. It really is an important meeting and I cannot—”

“Let me walk with you,” I said. I didn’t even look in the mirror as I stepped outside behind her.

“You’re not even matching, dear,” Alice said, but she turned and stepped quickly down the steps. “What will the editor of The Forge Hart say if someone sees you? What would Pearl say?”

“If yesterday’s speech is anything to go by, Pearl has turned over a new leaf. In any case, I promise I’ll return home to dress properly after we’ve had the chance to speak.”

Alice sighed. “What do you need to tell me so urgently?”

“The gates,” I replied. “I need your key.”

Alice coughed, startled, and put a hand over her mouth to cover her shock as she looked sideways at me. “I know there are lots of changes in Melfall, dear,” Alice said. “But I hardly think you’ll like country life any better. Besides, the changes are to take effect in all of The Forge—not just Melfall.”

My face broke into a grin. “I’m not leaving the city, Mother,” I replied. “I want to examine the Hearts. I want to bring one to my workshop to study how it works if it’s not too heavy. If I can’t move them, then I’ll—”

Alice stopped dead in her tracks. There were furrows on her forehead as she turned a stern expression on me.

“Absolutely not,” she replied. “I forbid it.”

My mouth dropped open. “Why?”

“The people of this city are too frightened of those dreadful things for you to bring one of them inside the city.”

“I need to see how it works—”

“You don’t.”

“You don’t understand—”

“I understand you are too curious for your own good.”

“But—”

Alice put a hand on my shoulder, giving me a slight shake. “It’s too soon, Ivy. The people of Melfall need to feel safe. There are lots of changes

afoot, and we need to make our people feel like they are properly protected. If I let you open the gates and bring those Hearts inside, there will be panic.”

“But—”

“No,” Alice said firmly. “Chasing down rabbit holes might satisfy your need to know how things work, but I have to lead these people, and they are frightened. Your curiosity will get you in trouble one day—but not today. I will not allow it.”

Alice straightened her hat, a stubborn expression on her face. “Besides,” she continued, as I hurried to keep up with her. “I’ve had to pull the guards from their double shifts on the wall to help with moving the people in the tunnels to proper accommodations. There’s no need for the guards to watch Hearts that aren’t doing anything. If the wall isn’t being properly manned, I cannot risk the gates being opened. Not yet.”

My shoulders sank, and I slowed to a stop. I watched as Alice turned to continue on her way, raising her hand in goodbye as she walked away.



I stood in the middle of the market underneath the broken scaffolding, trying to work out whether there was any way I would be able to get a closer look at the Pinnacle clock. Slowly, I walked around, noticing the paneling that seemed to cover the inner workings of the clock now. Rather than the tower showing its workings on the outside, like an unfinished structure, panels had been slotted into the grooves between the exposed struts. I ran my hand along them, a cool, smooth finish like pressed metal underneath my fingertips.

I looked up. Above, the paneling stopped, but it had an unfinished look, as though there should be more panels covering the skeleton of the tower.

“Ivy?”

I looked over my shoulder to see Gaia coming towards me, waving a hand.

“What are you doing here?” I asked

“On my way to visit Genie at the hospital.” She glanced up as though searching for whatever had caught my attention. Then she looked back at me. “What are you doing?”

I pointed up. “I’m trying to get a closer look at the clock, but I can’t get up to that platform. Do you think you could give me a step up? Then I should be able to reach that rung of the scaffold and pull myself up to the first level. I’ll get a better look from there.”

Gaia laughed. “Half of the people of Melfall are lying in hospital beds, and the other half are trying to work out what they’re going to do with their lives now that they won’t get paid for looking pretty. And you want to get a closer look at the inner workings of a clock!”

I put my hands on my hips as I glared at the Gaia, who was still smiling. Then I shrugged my shoulders.

“What can I say? It’s bothering me,” I replied. “The clock, the Hearts, the attack—there’s something going on that I can’t figure out. Something’s not right, and I’m sure it’s got something to do with this clock.”

Gaia smiled and shook her head. Then she got down on one knee and laced her fingers together so that the palms of her hands formed a stirrup for my foot.

“Thank you,” I said as I put my foot into her hands and reached upwards.

As I stretched, Gaia hoisted me a little higher until all of my weight was pressed down on her hands, and my other foot lifted off the ground. My hands wrapped around the lowest rung of the broken ladder, and I screwed up my face with the effort of hauling myself up.

As I got a grip, Gaia struggled to her feet, continuing to push my feet upward so that she took some of my body weight as I pulled myself up.

Finally, I hoisted my upper body onto the first platform of the scaffold, and I lay there panting for a moment.

“Ivy?” Gaia called up from below. “Are you alright?”

I wiggled further onto the platform until my whole body was lying on it. Then I got to my knees and leaned over the edge to wave at Gaia.

She waved back to me, then turned and kept walking in the direction of the hospital.

Catching my breath, I watched my sister until she disappeared down a street leading away from the city center. Then I turned my attention back to the clock tower.

I kneeled on the platform, to get a better view of the panels below that had slotted into the grooves of the upright poles of the tower. On the

outside, the metal had a pattern pressed into it. Hearts and swirls—the pattern matched the rest of the clock.

However, from a vantage point directly overhead, I saw the pattern on the outside of the panel was different to that on the inside. On the inside, the panel was a white color with uneven black and red marking in the corners that I couldn't quite see. I lay down on the scaffold, wiggling forward until I was hanging over the edge. My head hung over the side of the platform so that I could see directly down.

I squinted as I tried to see, wishing I had brought a torch to dispel the shadows on the inside of the panels. I inched further forward, sure that I would be able to see the pattern if I could just get a little closer.

I reached down, just able to touch the panel below me, and tried to press it back just enough to get a proper look at the design on the inside of the panel.

I gasped, then almost fell over the edge of the platform.

I wiggled back, getting my legs tangled in my skirts as I pulled myself back to lie flat on the wooden platform. I flipped onto my back and closed my eyes.

It wasn't just a panel that someone had put on the clock to hide the inner workings. It was a card. A playing card.

Thoughts swirled around my mind as the pieces of the puzzle started to fall into place.

The Hearts hadn't attacked the city. They were trying to get to the clock. To become part of the Pinnacle clock tower.

But why?

Tick, tick, tick.

I opened my eyes to look up at the giant clock face above me. It wasn't purely aesthetic to cover the clock in the panels made from the back of the Hearts.

Unless...

I rolled over to get to my knees, pushing myself up until I was standing on the platform, looking up. I covered my eyes to shield from the sun that was shining directly down on me.

There were hundreds of more slots. Enough spaces for each of the Hearts standing outside the gates to have a place on the clock. Like a puzzle.

Or a key.

I rubbed my forehead as I thought.

When a puzzle was complete, it revealed the full picture. A key was used to unlock something.

Once all of the Hearts were in place in the Pinnacle clock tower, what would it reveal? Or unlock?

And why?

My heart started racing as I remembered what Alice had said when she'd left the house this morning. *"I've had to pull the guards from their double shifts on the wall."*

I knelt down and judged the distance from the platform to the ground. Then, without another thought, I jumped, jarring my feet as I felt the impact of hitting the cobblestones. Then I got to my feet and started running.



I revved the engine, and the back wheel squealed as the steam bike leapt into action. The wind pushed against me as I drove through the streets, whipping at the loose strands of hair that were not pinned down by my helmet. Large goggles covered half of my face, but I was grateful they protected my eyes from both the wind and my hair. I gritted my teeth as the bike bounced and lurched across an uneven section of cobblestones in one of the narrower streets.

I gripped the handles tighter as I leaned into a tight turn, taking the quickest route to the Guild Hall, where I knew Alice would be meeting with the grandmasters. Although Alice hadn't had time for my request this morning, now that I had proof that the Hearts were somehow important, I had to make her listen to me.

I leaned into another corner, dodging a man cleaning windows before hitting the accelerator again. An inexplicable sense of urgency coursed through me. Somehow I knew that every moment that passed was important. Every moment wasted was a missed opportunity. I didn't have a moment to lose.

When I rounded the next corner, coming out of a narrow street to enter the wider Seventh Avenue, I spotted the Guild Hall immediately. Though it was no taller than any other building in the city, it dominated its neighbors

through the grandeur of its carved entrance and the copper-tipped spires on its tower roofs.

I drove straight up to the entrance, leaning my bike against a street lamp as I waved for the guard at the entrance to the Guild Hall to watch it. Taking the steps two at a time, I wrenched my helmet and goggles from my head and tugged off the bulky riding gloves. Then, tucking those under my arm, I used my other hand to clutch at my skirts as I ran the rest of the way up the steps.

The beautifully carved double-door entrance to the Guild Hall was closed, and a man—a different guard from last time—stood stiffly at the entrance.

“Are you a Guild member, miss?”

My heart sank a little. His demeanor didn’t give me much hope that he would be more cooperative than the last guard I’d met on these steps.

“No, I’m not—” I started. I noticed his name tag read “Craftsman Turner.”

He frowned at me, and his eyes roved over my clothing. I touched the now-wild mess of my hair, making a quick effort to comb my fingers through it.

“Do you have business here, miss?” Turner asked.

Then I gave up, straightened my shoulders, and looked the craftsman directly in the eyes.

“I need to see the president immediately, Craftsman Turner,” I replied, using as authoritative a voice as I could manage. His eyes widened a little in surprise at my use of his title. “It’s urgent.”

Turner raised one eyebrow, continuing to study me with a narrow and focused expression. His forehead furrowed, and he hesitated. I thought he was about to refuse my entry and started to marshal further arguments as to why he should open the door when he gave me a curt nod and stepped aside.

“As it happens, Madam President *is* here,” Turner said. “If you know that, I suppose you might need to see her, after all.”

I gave him a grateful smile. “Thank you, Craftsman.”

The door swung open, and I strode quickly inside. Turner didn’t move from his post, but he raised a hand and snapped his fingers twice. Another man appeared, wearing the same emblem on his coat lapel.

“Show the Lady to the main hall, Dirk. Madam President is meeting the Grand Masters—but don’t let her interrupt their meeting,” Turner cautioned, pointing his forefinger to emphasize his point. I opened my mouth to protest, but he continued. “Announce her presence, and let the Grand Masters decide whether she should be admitted or not.”

Turner turned back to me. “Apprentice Dirk will take you from here,” he said with a bow. I gave the man another smile and followed Dirk into the mysterious Guild Hall.

Few people were allowed into the halls of the Guild unless they were members. I’d never seen the inside of this building, and though I didn’t have time to appreciate my surrounds, I couldn’t help but see the evidence of the different Guild specialties that were on display in the hall: beautifully wrought metal sculptures made by the Metallurgy Guild, an ornate grandfather clock made from the joint efforts of the Wood-turners Guild and the Horology Guild, and several prototypes of inventions from the Inventors Guild that I really wanted to take a closer look at. There were plenty more pieces on display, but my eyes were drawn to the center of the hall where a glass sculpture stood, in the shape of a woman holding a lamp with a flame flickering inside. The plaque noted it was made by the Glass-blowing Guild—the most beautiful lamp I’d ever seen—and I paused to peer at the inscription, which read: *The Guilds hold the lamp that lights the way to the future.*

Dirk’s footsteps clipped across the polished floor as we walked. I was so busy staring around me that when he came to an abrupt stop outside another set of double doors, I almost crashed into him. These doors were even grander than those at the entrance and inlaid with tiny shapes of colored metal, marble, glass, and wood in an incredible mosaic of the same emblem—many hands reaching for the light—that was stitched into the Guildsmen’s lapels.

“Wait here,” he instructed, then pushed on the door, opening it just wide enough to step through. Inside, the conversation abruptly halted as Dirk’s crisp footsteps echoed as he moved inside, leaving me outside, holding my breath and hoping Alice would agree to see me.

I twisted my fingers in my skirts, as every moment stretched out. The urgency built inside me as I waited.

The clipped footsteps returned, accompanied by softer footsteps, and as Alice’s face appeared in the doorway, I felt a flood of relief. I caught hold

of her hand before I saw the tight pinch of her mouth.

“What are you doing here?” Alice snapped. “This is a very important meeting. I can’t just—”

Her tone caught me by surprise, but I gripped her hand more tightly. “The Hearts were trying to get to the clock.” I spoke quickly, pouring out the words before Alice could leave. “The Pinnacle Clock. Remember, it started working at the same time the Hearts reappeared. It was drawing the Hearts to it. Somehow they’re connected—as though they’re the missing parts of a puzzle—but they’re not finished yet.”

“I don’t see how—”

“I feel it, Mother,” I tugged on her hand. “You know I have a “knack” for machines.” I couldn’t use the word magic. Alice would only laugh and dismiss my concerns. “I just *know*.” I took a breath. “Please, listen to me. I would never interrupt such an important meeting without good reason. I know that something is going to happen at the wall. You’re the only one with a key. I need to—”

Alice took a deep breath and tugged her hand away. She stared at me for a moment, unblinking, pressed her lips together, and, without a word, turned to step back into the hall.

I reached out after her, “Please...” I whispered, but I couldn’t follow because Dirk stood in my path.

“You may not enter,” he said. I looked up into his expressionless face and knew that no amount of pleading would budge him.

Alice’s voice wafted through the still-open door. Then, to my surprise, Alice stepped out again. She fixed me with a stare.

“Lead the way,” Alice said. I blinked, as she strode past me without pausing. She turned her head and gave me a hard stare without breaking stride. “This had better be important.”

I picked up my skirts and raced to keep pace.

“You can ride with me,” I said as we both walked through the entrance and down the stairs.

Alice gave me a confused glance, then her expression became horrified as I stopped in front of the bike.

“You can’t possibly—”

“It’s the fastest way to get to the wall,” I replied, handing her the only helmet. I slid the goggles over my eyes, then swung a leg over the steam bike. “We don’t have a moment to lose.”

I could see Alice starting to formulate all the objections as to why she would not be riding on my contraption, but then a determined expression came over her face, and she took a step forward and swung her leg over the bike too. Her arms tightened around my waist.

“Hold on,” I called out to her, before revving the engine and kicking the bike into action.

Alice screamed as we took off in the direction of the wall.



Marching footsteps drowned out even the sound of the steam engine when we were a block away from the wall. I swerved out of a side-street and into the center of Twelfth Avenue, putting out one foot to help me take the tight corner. Alice wound her arms around my waist so tightly that she almost squeezed the breath from my body.

A heavy feeling expanded in my stomach as the sound of marching grew louder. I accelerated, forcing the bike faster, and faster. Alice let out another scream, and I was sure that she'd squeezed her eyes shut in fear.

The stone structure of the wall loomed up ahead, but something wasn't right.

I squinted, noticing the thick metal gates weren't in place—they were wide open—but I shook my head, unable to believe what I was seeing.

It can't be, I told myself. Alice has the only key.

The thought had barely popped into my mind when I realized the movement at the gates was the Hearts, marching three abreast down the center of the avenue.

Their eyes were fixed ahead, and their progress was relentless. They didn't seem to notice the people running out of their way, darting into shops or doorways or slamming the shutters shut. There was a slight

disruption in the movements of the Hearts in the center of the column. There was something in their path—a mound—but instead of avoiding it, they were marching over the top of it.

On the side of the road, people were pointing at the mound, tears streaming down their faces. It wasn't a something, but a *someone*. A someone who hadn't moved out of their way fast enough.

I gritted my teeth as I slowed the bike to a stop, more carefully this time, so that Alice could dismount before I flung my leg over the bike and leaned it up against a lamp post.

Alice struggled to get the helmet off her head, but I yanked my goggles from my eyes and started running toward the open gates. There was nothing I could do for the person dead in the streets, but I had to do something about the gates before the Hearts caused any more damage.

I didn't even pause as I pushed my weight against the door of the watchhouse and barged inside. I swung my head from side to side as I searched for Captain Walsh.

"What are you doing?" I screamed at a guard, sitting on a seat in the watchhouse next to a system of bells and lights that were supposed to sound in an emergency. His uniform marked him as a junior watchman. He looked at me in astonishment, then jumped to his feet. "Close the gates!"

The watchman blinked, as though he didn't understand what I was saying. "The gates, miss?"

"Close the gates!" I yelled again, pointing outside. He took a few steps around me, toward the door.

Alice appeared in the doorway of the watchhouse, pale and panting. Despite appearances, when she spoke, her voice rang with authority. "Where is your commanding officer, Watchman Vern?"

The astonished watchman shook his head. "Off duty," he replied, belatedly saluting Alice as he recognized his president.

"Who gave the order to open the gates?" Alice demanded.

Vern shrugged, looking around in bewilderment. "Nobody," he replied. "There's no-one else here. We're on a skeleton staff as we were ordered to stand down from the emergency protocols. We thought the attack was over. Most of the guards have either gone on much-needed rest and respite, or they've been ordered to duties within the city. I'm sorry, Madam President," he said, shaking his head. "I thought those orders came directly from you."

Alice was still struggling to catch her breath. "Don't concern yourself, Watchman. I did give those orders. What I'm trying to understand is why these gates are open and why there are hundreds of Hearts entering Melfall."

Vern looked around and saw the Hearts marching in the street. His jaw dropped open.

“I’ll sound the alarm, Madam President,” Vern saluted her again, then ran back to pull the levers that rang the bells and sounded the alarm at watch stations all along the wall.

I didn’t wait for the watchman to finish what he was doing. Instead, I darted out of the watchhouse and took the steps up the stone wall two at a time, towards the wall walk along the ramparts of the perimeter wall.

At the top, the wind was stronger, pulling my hair into knots and making my eyes water. I turned to face the city, putting my back to the wind and watched the Hearts march down Twelfth Avenue.

My mouth went dry. I’d failed.

I should have insisted on taking a look at those Hearts earlier. I should have figured it out. If I hadn’t been so distracted—by Raven, by my new sister, by the plight of the people in the tunnels...

Then I shook my head. This was no time to dwell on regrets. The Hearts had to be stopped before they hurt anyone else. Maybe, if the watchman could get the gates closed again, perhaps we would still trap most of the Hearts outside the wall. There might still be time.

As I turned towards the steps, out of the corner of my eye, I saw two figures leaning up against the outer edge of the ramparts. They both wore garish suits—one was orange with a green check, while the other was green with an orange check—and both wore identical grins on their faces.

I froze, and my mouth dropped open at the sight of the Tweedles. The terrible tightness in my chest grew worse.

“You,” I stammered, finally. “You did this.”

The grins on the Tweedles’ faces grew even wider as they looked at each other like two little boys who’d been given the keys to a sweet shop.

“Who us?” they answered in unison. “Did what?”

I gritted my teeth, trying to keep my temper under control. I took a slow step towards them and pointed a finger at the Hearts marching down Twelfth Avenue. “That!”

“That?” Tweedle Dee asked, looking at his twin with mock confusion.

“What’s that?” Tweedle Dum looked around with wide eyes, then back to Dee. “I couldn’t say.”

“Nor I,” Tweedle Dee said. They both shrugged their shoulders and looked back at me, grinning.

I bunched my hands into fists and took another deep breath. “You opened the gates. You let the Hearts back into the city.”

“Oh, is that what you’re talking about?” Tweedle Dee asked.

Tweedle Dum looked at his twin. “Is that what she’s talking about?”

I ground my teeth together. “Yes, that’s what I’m talking about.”

Tweedle Dum scratched his chin. “I suppose we did do that,” he said.

“Guilty, as charged.” Tweedle Dee’s white-blond hair was combed flat to his head, but it shifted as he eagerly nodded his head.

“How?” I asked.

“You want to know how?” Tweedle Dee asked.

“She wants to know how,” Tweedle Dum agreed. They both giggled.

“Yes, how did you open the gates?” I yelled in exasperation. “They were locked!”

“Oh, that,” Tweedle Dum arched one eyebrow. He crossed his arms and looked sideways at his brother. “Shall we show her, Dee?”

Tweedle Dee tapped one finger against his chin, thinking. Then he gave his twin a nod. “Show her, Dum.”

Tweedle Dum reached into his pocket, slowly drawing something out, which he held up in the air.

A key.

A very old, brass key with a heart molded into the bow.

I reached out to touch it, but Dum snatched it away.

“Is that a key to the gates?” I asked. “But only Alice has a key...” I stared from one Tweedle to the other.

“Only Alice has a key?” Dum asked. He put a hand to his mouth, in mock-shock, and turned to Dee. “I didn’t know that.”

“I didn’t know that either,” Dee replied. He tapped a finger against his chin, mock-frowning. “Is that right?”

Dum scratched his chin. “No, that can’t be right,” Dum answered.

“You’ve got a key right there,” Dee agreed.

The twins grinned at each other.

“So there must be more than one,” Dum said, triumphantly. Dum turned back to me. “No, Alice doesn’t have the only key.”

I clenched my fists, trying to contain my exasperation. “Where did you get it?”

Dum took off his hat and scratched his head, as though he was thinking, but his eyes glittered with mischief. “Can you remember, Dee?”

“Oh yes, I do remember,” Dee answered his brother. “Do you?”

Dum grinned, settling his hat back on his head again. “I remember too.”

I fought the urge to throttle them both, knowing that interrupting them would only lengthen their explanation. I felt like the pressure of an explosion was building up inside of me, at risk of exploding.

“Yes, as it happens, Her Royal Highness...” Dum continued.

“Our rightful ruler,” Dee added.

“The most rightful ruler as ever there was,” Dum agreed.

“And the reddest,” Dee added.

“And the heartiest,” Dum said, then they both roared with laughter. Then Dee stopped and leaned forward to peer at his brother’s coat lapel. Dum stopped to see what his brother was staring at. Suddenly, Dee slapped Dum hard on the chest.

“Hey!” Dum said. Without warning, he slapped his twin across the face.

“Ouch!” Dee answered.

“You hit me first.” Dum put his hands on his hips.

Dee held up his hand. A black mark was smeared over his palm. “Bug.”

I cleared my throat, putting my hands on my hips. “The Queen of Hearts had a key,” I guessed.

The Tweedles turned abruptly. All mirth was gone from their expressions. They both stared at me, sulkily.

“You don’t think she would have given up her key to the city when she left, do you?” They said in unison.

I didn’t answer, as I turned to rush back down the steps.



I turned off the engine and pulled up my goggles until they rested on the top of my forehead. Alice’s tight grip around my waist loosened slightly, and she jumped off the bike as though it was a wild animal. I’d stopped the bike at the edge of the city center. The Pinnacle rose up in front of us.

I exchanged a look with Alice, but only for a moment before I stared up at the Pinnacle clock.

In front of my eyes, the Hearts were moving in a rapid and coordinated fashion, forming card towers to hoist each other up the side of the tower. They moved so quickly, I could barely keep up with how they moved, but once the Hearts had finished making a card tower that reached all the way

up to the Pinnacle clock, then Hearts started slotting themselves into place in the metal struts that made up the framework of the tower.

“What are they doing?” Alice asked, with both wonder and confusion in her voice.

I shook my head at a loss to explain. “I don’t know, but I don’t have a good feeling about it.”

“Can we stop them?”

I looked over at her, then glanced around. There wasn’t another person in the city center. Behind us, the brightly colored shutters on the buildings were shut tight. If there was anyone else around, they’d locked themselves up at the reappearance of the Hearts.

“The two of us?” I shook my head. “I think the Hearts attacked people before because they were in between them and the clock. If we try to stop them...”

Alice nodded. Then she closed her eyes and rubbed her forehead. Her shoulders slumped.

I turned back to the clock, unable to take my eyes off the activity in front of me. It was like a mechanical dance, watching the Hearts climb up the card tower, then slot into the spaces between the tower struts.

Once the cards climbing the card tower had found their place in the tower, the card tower seemed to disappear as the cards that formed it, started slotting themselves into place from the top down.

I stood completely still, holding my breath as I watched the final card scramble up the tower, then slide into place.

When the last card slotted into place, there was a grumble from deep beneath the ground.

Alice called out, reaching out to grab my arm, as though she was losing her balance. I stumbled sideways, falling to my knees. The ground trembled, starting to move underneath me.

I looked back at Alice, who was staring at me with wide eyes. We both looked up. The Pinnacle tower had started to rotate.

“We need to get out of here,” I said. We helped each other to our feet. “The bike will be quicker.”

Alice was holding out her hands, unsteadily staring around. “Do you think you’ll be able to balance that thing while the ground is moving?”

I was standing with my arms out, and my knees bent, absorbing the movement of the ground underneath me. I stumbled over to the bike, taking

it by the handles. I was about to swing my leg over the bike when the ground rumbled again as it continued to move. I stumbled again, and the bike fell on top of my leg.

I cried out, but more in surprise than in real pain. Alice helped me to shift the bike to free my leg, then helped me to my feet.

“Actually,” I replied. “I think we’re going to have to walk.”



I trudged through the city, moving slower as I walked the steam bike instead of riding it. The shuddering movement of the ground had stopped—at least for the moment—but I was too shaken to get back on the bike in case it started moving again.

The streets were unnaturally quiet. Normally, at this time of the evening, they’d be packed with people—or at least they would have been before the attack of the Hearts. Now, they were empty.

Alice had left me to return to the President’s Palace to talk to her advisers about what to do next. I hadn’t been able to go home with her. I couldn’t bear sitting and waiting—I needed to find out what was happening and why. All of the puzzles still nagged at me, but I *knew* I was on the verge of finding out the truth.

I couldn’t sit still. A restless energy pulsed through me like an itch just underneath my skin. I decided to see Raven instead. He might know something more about the Pinnacle clock and the Hearts and how the ground was moving.

I came to a sudden stop as a wailing sound drifted upwards from underneath my feet. I looked down, still shaky though the ground was still, and saw the manhole. A scream wafted up from below.

I leaned the bike on the ground, then rushed to pull the cover off the manhole. I reached inside.

A hand grabbed mine—a small hand that easily fit within my own. I grabbed it and pulled. A child appeared, covered in dust and dirt, coughing and gasping for breath. He collapsed on the ground as soon as he climbed out of the hole. Another hand appeared, grasping for the rim of the manhole. I leaned forward again to help a woman climb out. Then two more

people appeared, each of them coughing, crying, and sucking in deep breaths.

Finally, Raven appeared, looking far more disheveled than I'd ever seen him. His coat was torn, he was covered with the same grey dirt that covered the rest of them.

"A tunnel collapsed in the earthquake," Raven explained. He ran a hand through his hair, that looked grey from the dust, and shook the dirt from his coat.

"That was no earthquake," I replied, reaching out with both hands to grab his hands, then I pulled him towards me and wrapped my hands around his waist.

Raven looked as though he was about to ask a question when there was another rumbling underground and a cracking sound. We scrambled back from the edge of the manhole. Raven grabbed up the child in his arms. The other three scrambled after us, just as the manhole collapsed, causing the ground around it to cave in.

"We need to get these people to the hospital," I said. I stood up my bike, and Raven sat the little boy on the seat as I pushed it. The boy whimpered quietly, and the woman walked alongside him, holding his hand and murmuring comforting noises. Raven followed behind, helping another man who was limping on an injured leg.

It was completely dark by the time we got to the hospital. Even the lamplighters hadn't come out to light the street lamps, and the only light in the city was the light of the swollen moon that hung low in the sky.

Our small group limped into the entry of the hospital, and I blinked as I saw that the waiting room was packed with people who'd suffered injuries with the movement of the ground. The triage nurses were loudly repeating the need to wait patiently to be seen by the next available doctor or nurse.

We left the people in the waiting room, and I took Raven's hand and walked through the hospital hallway to find Gaia.

"What did you mean, it wasn't an earthquake?" Raven asked when we left the crowds of the waiting room, and made our way through the corridor.

"You won't believe me," I said, shaking my head. "I barely believe it myself."

"Try me." He pulled back on my hand until I stopped and turned to face him.

I nodded. "Gaia should be in Genie's room. I'll tell you when we get there."

Raven looked like he was about to protest, but then several nurses rushed by, rolling a trolley occupied by a wailing man clutching a bleeding arm.

I knocked, then pushed open the door to Genie's room to find Gaia perched on the edge of his bed, her phoenix sitting on her shoulder. I was surprised to see Chesh there too. His arm was in a sling, but the color had returned to his face. He stood when he saw me, and a smile lit his face, almost immediately dampened when he saw me holding hands with Raven.

Gaia leapt up from where she sat on the bed and rushed over to take my hands in hers. "Are you alright? We felt the earthquake. It's still rumbling," she said.

As she spoke, the ground rumbled again, and some fine plaster dust floated from the ceiling.

Everyone looked up, warily, as though wondering whether the whole ceiling would fall in.

"It isn't an earthquake," Raven said, then turned to me. "What is it?"

I rubbed at my forehead, closing my eyes briefly as I marshaled my thoughts into some sort of coherent order. "The Hearts got back in. They reached the Pinnacle clock. They seemed to activate the ground movements, as though they were some sort of key."

I stared around at blank, confused faces, then proceeded to tell them the whole story, starting with when I'd climbed the broken scaffolding that morning.

When I finished, the building groaned again, and more plaster dust fell from the ceiling, as though confirming my words.

"The underground tunnel system has partially collapsed," Raven reported. "Anyone caught down there is probably dead. I managed to save a few, but while the ground is moving, the tunnels won't be safe."

I squeezed his hand, grateful he'd managed to escape. Raven hung his head, no doubt wondering how many he'd left behind.

"Do you think the Tweedles are behind it?" Chesh asked, sounding doubtful.

I shrugged. "Honestly, I think they're working for the Queen."

"I thought the Queen was dead?" Chesh replied. "Alice always said—"

Gaia was shaking her head. “All over the Twelve Kingdoms, those who were presumed dead are returning.”

“Why would she be making the ground move?” Raven asked. “For what purpose?”

I sighed, taking out Mr. Pillar’s pocket watch that hadn’t stopped ticking, no matter that I hadn’t wound it in almost a month. I flicked open the face of the watch and stared at the ticking of the second hand mesmerized by the tiny movement. “So many questions,” I murmured. The pocket watch had started ticking at the same time that the Pinnacle clock had started working, at the same time the Hearts had reappeared in the city. I now knew why the Hearts had appeared, and why they’d been trying to get to the clock. I still didn’t understand why the Queen—if she was behind it all—wanted to make the city move. “So many things that don’t make sense.”

“Maybe we can’t work it out because we’re on the ground,” Chesh said, leaning against the wall.

I frowned, looking up at him. “What do you mean?”

“Remember you said there were those machines on the roof that were suddenly working again. You first noticed them when you glimpsed them from the top of the wall, but you’d never noticed them from ground level before. Maybe the movement of the ground and the clock would make more sense from above?”

My mouth dropped open. I’d almost forgotten the machines on the roofs of the city. Another puzzle that hadn’t been solved, only overshadowed by so many other things that didn’t make sense.

“That’s brilliant, Chesh!” I said, beaming at him.

Chesh smiled back, meeting my eyes for a moment, before looking down at his shoes. “You can use my hover if you like.”

“You got it working?” I asked, unable to hide the surprise from my voice.

Chesh sighed and shook his head, kicking the floor with his shoe. “Nah, but I’m sure it’s almost there. Knowing you, you’ll have it working in minutes. I don’t know how you do it.” He glanced up at me again, with a half-smile on his face. “You and your ‘knack.’”

A smile passed over Gaia’s face, and she raised an eyebrow at me, but I was already thinking about the plan. I nodded and was turning to leave the room when Raven grabbed my hand.

“It’s dark,” he pointed out. “You won’t see anything. None of the street lamps are lit.”

I looked out of the window, and my heart sank. Raven was right. Even if I did get the hover working, I wouldn’t be able to see anything until dawn.

At that moment, a nurse bustled into the room, declared the end of visiting hours, and shooed us all out.

As Gaia, Raven, and I stood out in front of the hospital, we looked at each other.

“Shall I walk you home?” Raven asked. He looked up at the sky. “I can’t move around underground anymore, so I’ll have to make sure I’m home by sunrise. Still, there are a few hours before I need to be safely back inside.”

I shook my head. “I’m going to Chesh’s workshop. It might take me the rest of the night to get the hover working. Or it might not work at all, but I have to try.”

7TH SEPTEMBER



I wiped my hand across my brow, my eyes dry and burning with fatigue. I hadn't allowed myself to close my eyes all night, but now, in the deep lateness of the hour, I felt the effects of lack of sleep.

I put down the screwdriver and looked at the hover again. I put my hands on it, pushing on the accelerator. The engine hummed, lifting the hover off the ground for a moment. Hope buoyed my chest for a moment—maybe, *maybe*, this time, it would work.

Then, the purring of the engine became a wheeze. The machine tilted sideways and started spinning wildly.

I quickly removed my hands from the accelerator and turned off the engine. The machine fell to the ground with a *thunk*, but it didn't land true and, with a clatter, the central spine holding the handlebars upright lurched sideways. I sighed and let my chin fall against my chest. My mind was fuzzy, and I couldn't think properly.

A faint glow lit up the opposite wall as the first rays of daylight peeped through the window. I'd worked all night to make the hover functional but still hadn't managed it.

Perhaps Gaia had been wrong about my magic. Perhaps my "knack" was nothing more than intuition.

I covered my face with my hands, squeezing my eyes shut before I stood abruptly upright and put my hands on my hips. "You *will* work," I demanded aloud. "And you *will* take me up high enough to see what is happening to this city."

I reached out to put my hands on the handlebars, determined to test this “so-called” magic, once and for all. I gripped the handlebars tightly, feeling for the lever of the accelerator with my thumb. I turned on the power again and, without pressing on the accelerator, I felt the power hum underneath the palms of my hands.

I focused on the *hum* as I slowly pressed my thumb against the accelerator. As I concentrated on it, the sound of the engine fell away, but I could still *feel* it humming beneath my skin.

With the pressure on the accelerator, the hover lifted about a foot into the air. I held my breath, waiting for the engine to fail again—but it didn’t. I tentatively put one foot on the platform to mount it. The engine hummed, stable and consistent, and I paused a moment before putting all of my weight onto the platform as I removed my foot from the ground.

The hover wobbled, but I gripped the handlebars tightly and focused my attention on *feeling* the inner workings of the engine. I concentrated, focusing all of my thought on it—wordlessly encouraging the machine to continue the smooth running of its parts. The hover continued to *purr*, continuing to hover for longer than I’d ever seen it.

I pressed the accelerator lever with my thumb a little harder, revving the engine, and pushed the hover higher, then higher again. All of my attention was focused on the engine, as I felt all of the parts working together in harmony to make the machine work. The *thrum* of the engine became part of me, as though the hover and I merged somehow. A small smile spread across my face.

Gaia was right—my magic could make it work, as long as I concentrated on feeling it, and not tinkering with it like a puzzle.

I pushed the hover into the next gear and leaned forward, pushing the hover to move in the same direction, toward the door.

I let out a laugh as the hover obeyed my mental commands, moving better than it ever had. I flew out of the door of Chesh’s workshop, then pushed the hover to fly higher in the sky.

As I flew through the doorway, the ceiling disappeared, replaced by the dim golden glow of the dawn sky. The engine rumbled as my concentration faded, and I fixed my focus once more on the inner workings of the hover. I turned in the direction of the city’s clock and suddenly found myself flying across the street, my hair and skirts streaming behind me as I leaned into the direction I wanted the hover to take me.

Without the friction of wheels on cobblestones, I moved even faster than when I rode the steam bike. The ground became a blur as I sped by.

At the thought, I willed the hover to rise into the air, flying along the line of the rooftops. A shout came from one of the buildings, whose shutters opened, and a woman leaned out to watch my passing with wide eyes.

With a sudden surge of enthusiasm, I let out a whooping sound and took one hand off the handlebars to wave to the woman, whose mouth hung as wide-open as her eyes. The hover wobbled again, and I renewed my focus, gripping the handles tightly with both hands. With the ground still making sudden movements, I had to concentrate on staying between the buildings that rose up on either side of me. To make it easier, I pushed the hover a little higher until I was flying over the rooftops.

I saw the cogs turning on the rooftops, and wished I had the time to examine them—but that would have to wait.

The sun popped over the horizon, bathing the city in a golden glow, as well as casting long shadows. The clock rose up ahead of me, and I felt a renewed sense of urgency to move.



When I approached the spire of the Pinnacle clock, I took the hover in a circle around it, slowing down to a stop in mid-air while I looked over the city.

At first, all I could see was Melfall, its wide avenues leading from the market to the perimeter wall in every direction. The puzzle of narrow streets between the avenues made uneven patterns.

Then suddenly, the ground jerked, and the whole city moved. My mouth dropped open. The twelve avenues that spread out from the center of the city like spokes on a wheel now looked more like the hands on a clock. The Pinnacle clock chimed the hour, and the whole city moved again, so the avenues relocated around in a circle. When the ground stopped moving, Twelfth Avenue was in the place that Eleventh Avenue had just occupied. The ground—the avenues—had moved around like an hour hand, but in the opposite direction—counterclockwise.

I squinted at the ground—I hadn't been looking at Twelfth Avenue at all. The real Twelfth Avenue was pointing towards what would be three on

the clock face. Rubbing my forehead, I did a quick count—it was about nine hours since the last Hearts had slid into place into the Pinnacle clock tower, which had set off the movement of the city. There had been regular movements under the city—what felt like earthquakes to anyone who didn't know better—but it hadn't occurred to me that they were happening every hour, on the hour.

So Melfall looked and acted like a clock—but why? And why was it going backward? Unless it was counting down? But to what?

A shiver of fear ran through me. Another puzzle. Now, I didn't have time to figure it out. For once, I knew Raven wouldn't have any more information than I did. But the Tweedles had let the Hearts into Melfall. They must have known what they would do.

It was time to find some real answers.



On Chesh's hover, it didn't take very long until I spotted the ornate rooftop of the Queen's old palace. The residence was whitewashed, with red shutters on its hundreds of windows, rising into four towers, one at each corner of the building, each of which was topped with bright red tiles and decorated with ornate wrought iron hearts at the tips. The palace was surrounded by gardens featuring red roses that had been trimmed into the shape of hearts.

From above, I could see that paths of white gravel ran around the residence and through the neatly mown green grass like ribbons. The edge of the garden was fenced by wrought iron in the same heart shapes as the tips of the towers. Objectively, it was a beautiful building.

From the stories of the reign of the Queen of Hearts, I knew this building had instilled terror in the citizens of The Forge. Not long ago, I'd thought this building had been abandoned.

Now, from above, it looked freshly painted and its gardens neatly tended. It was in even better condition than the last time I'd visited the Tweedles.

I landed the hover on the front lawns, stroking a hand over the handlebars as I switched off the ignition, sending silent thoughts of gratitude—as though the hover would understand—for bringing me all this

way without incident. As soon as I lifted my hands from the handles, the machine seemed to lose all sentience.

Heavy footsteps pounded down the gravel, and I turned to see several large Hearts marching towards me.

No, not Hearts—not like the ones that had been stalking the city for weeks. These were double the size and more humanoid than the other Hearts had ever been.

“You do not have permission to enter,” the first robot spoke in a mechanical voice. “You are an intruder.”

“I wish to speak with the Tweedles,” I said, putting my hands on my hips as I determined to stand my ground.

The robots pointed their spears towards me. “Intruders are forbidden.”

I swallowed but didn’t move. I lifted my chin.

“Forbidden by whom?” I asked, hoping they weren’t attuned enough to human behavior to hear the quiver in my voice.

“Forbidden by order of Her Royal Highness, the Queen of Hearts.”

My heart did a somersault inside my chest. The first robot reached out and seized my arm.

“Hey!” I startled.

The other robot stepped forward to take my other arm. Together, they lifted me into the air as they turned me towards the gates.

“Intruders are forbidden.”

With its other hand, the second robot seized the hover, and, together, the two robots marched me towards the gates.

“Hey, what are you doing?” I struggled, kicking my feet in the air, but it had no effect on the robots at all. “Put me down! And put down that hover, too!”

The robot hurled the hover at the fence, and I gasped as it smashed into the wrought iron fencing, bending the metal column at a right angle as several screws spilled onto the ground.

I froze, wondering if the robots planned to hurl me out of the gates too. I looked over my shoulder and saw someone in a first-story window staring out at us. In that brief glance, I was sure it was Chesh’s friend, Oscar Pankhurst, who had gone missing only a week before.

Suddenly, another piece of the puzzle fell into place. The Queen had kidnapped people from the city—those who could build her robots and restore her palace to its former glory and who knew what else. Maybe

they'd also been set to work on whatever mechanism was causing the city to move. I clenched my fists. I couldn't let the robots throw me out before I discovered the truth.

"I'm not an intruder," I said in as commanding a voice as I could muster. "I'm here to see the Queen. Take me to her!"

The robots stopped mid-stride.



The Queen of Hearts sat on a throne in the middle of a large room lined with red carpet and large paintings of herself. I had never seen the Queen in person. She'd disappeared before I was born, but I'd seen her pictures in the old newspapers I'd been researching since the Pinnacle clock started unexpectedly working again.

In the flesh, she was more beautiful than the pictures gave her credit. Flawless skin like alabaster, bright red hair pulled into an intricate bun and finished with a gold tiara inlaid with heart-shaped rubies. She wore a fashionably fitted vest and skirts of red velvet. Her lips were heart-shaped and painted red, which made her look as though she was smiling, but her eyes were cold and calculating as she looked down at me without moving her head.

"You are the spawn of the usurper," she said, a statement of fact.

"Exactly right, Your Majesty," one of the Tweedle's said. His voice startled me—I hadn't noticed anyone else in the room except for the Queen. The Tweedles stepped out from behind the enormous throne to come to stand at each side of the Queen.

They both bowed to the Queen, deeply and in unison. She didn't even look at them.

"Of course, I'm right," the Queen said, her voice smooth and rich. "I'm the rightful Queen."

She rapped a finger against the gilded arm of her throne, then raised one eyebrow. "Bow to me, girl. I am your queen, after all."

I lifted my chin, but the robot came behind me and laid a metallic hand on my shoulder, so forcefully that I was pushed to my knees. I glared, but the robot didn't stop, the pressure of its hand forcing me forward until my forehead was pressed against the floor.

“That’s better.”

The Queen rose from her throne, slowly and gracefully. Her skirts swished as she crossed the floor to come to stand in front of me. The robot held me so that I could only see her embroidered slippers and the bottom of her plush skirts and layered lace petticoats.

“What are you doing here, girl?” the Queen asked. I tried to shrug off the robot’s heavy hand on my shoulder, but the robot held me down.

“What are you doing here? You’re supposed to be dead,” I said, speaking more sharply than I’d intended, the frustration of being held down seeping into my voice.

The Queen rapped me on the head with something sharp.

“Your Majesty,” Tweedle Dum spoke up from behind her.

The Queen did not reply.

“He’s asking you a question,” I said to the Queen.

“He’s reminding you of your manners,” the Queen replied.

Tweedle Dee walked across the room and slapped me over the back of the head. “You must address our Queen as Your Majesty.”

I rolled my eyes.

“Release her,” the Queen commanded, and the robot released me from its grip. I looked up at her. She raised one perfectly shaped eyebrow. “Did the usurper say I was dead?” The Queen threw her head back and laughed. “As though she had such power.”

“Then where have you been all these years?” I asked. “Why have you come back now?”

The Queen hit me on the head again with her red fan. Her eyes narrowed.

“You have no right to ask questions. You’re lucky I do not take your head from your shoulders right here.” She waved a hand, as though indicating I wasn’t worth such concern. “As it happens, I have been biding my time. Waiting until the right time to reclaim my throne.”

“The people won’t accept you. The Forge is better off without you.”

The Queen’s expression darkened as her glare snapped toward me again.

“She lies, Your Majesty,” Tweedle Dum kneeled, putting his hand over his heart.

“The Forge cries out for your return, Your Majesty,” Tweedle Dee added. “The people seek freedom from the usurper.”

“That’s not true!” I said. “President Alice has been a much better ruler than you ever were. The people chose her to lead them.”

The Tweedles were shaking their heads, their blonde hair bobbing as they did so.

“What the people want is irrelevant.” The Queen waved a hand dismissively, then tapped her fan closed, before rapping it against the palm of her hand. “I am their rightful Queen. They are my subjects. Mine. Do not worry, I have a surprise for them.”

I frowned. “What kind of surprise?”

The Queen struck me with her fan again.

I rolled my eyes. “Your Majesty,” I added.

The Queen reached out and grabbed my chin with her hand. Her fingers were strong and bony, without any tenderness at all. She yanked my chin so that my face was angled upward, and she studied me with her cold, dark eyes. Her lips pursed, pinching at the edges and emphasizing their heart shape.

“Do you think I am so foolish that I would tell you so that you can run back to tell the usurper?”

“You think Alice is powerful enough to thwart your plans?” I said.

Tweedle Dum smacked me over the back of the head, harder this time. I glared at him as I rubbed my head.

“Your Majesty,” I added, through gritted teeth.

The Queen laughed. “Of course not, but it would spoil the surprise. I’ll tell you a secret, though.”

The Tweedles looked at each other, rubbing their hands together, before looking at the Queen in anticipation.

“Tell us, please, Your Majesty,” they said in unison.

I rolled my eyes. The Queen didn’t take her eyes from me as she narrowed her eyes.

“You are insolent,” she said, then she waved a hand as though swatting a fly. “It is of no consequence. No matter what you or the usurper say or do, my friends and I will regain control—not only of The Forge but of each of the Twelve Kingdoms. There is nothing you can do to stop us.”

The Queen twirled around and strode back to the dais, where she sat down on her throne, and flicked open her fan to wave some cool air at her face. Her expression was suddenly bored, and she looked out of the

window. The Tweedles rushed back to her side, kneeling next to her as though waiting for the next scraps of attention.

“Where are my roses?” The Queen rapped her fingertips on the arm of the throne. “Bring me the gardener.”

“Of course, Your Majesty,” the Tweedles said in unison, and hurried away.

The Queen’s eyes roved around the room then settled on me once again. “Is this one still here? She is polluting my halls with her unbeauty. Take her out of my sight. Throw her onto the street.”

The robot behind me grabbed me by the arms again. “Let me go!” I said as I was yanked to my feet. I pulled away from the robot.

“I’m not leaving. I know what you’re doing. I know you’ve kidnapped people from the streets of Melfall. I’m not leaving until you let them go!”

The Queen raised an elegant eyebrow. “Which people?”

“The ones who have gone missing this past month or so. I saw one of them in the window when I was outside. Do you deny it?”

The Queen stared at me. “My subjects are here at my invitation. They are my special guests. They have been given the opportunity to utilize their talents. They are honored to serve me, as they should be.”

“They’re afraid they’ll lose their heads if they refuse,” I retorted.

The Queen shrugged. “They are some of the smartest people in this city. They understand the benefits of pleasing their Queen.” She motioned to her robots. “She is boring me. Take her away.”

The robot lifted me off the floor and swung me over his shoulder so that my head was hanging down his back. I banged my fists against the metal panels of his back and looked up to see the upside-down figure of the Queen of Hearts as the robot marched out of the hall.

“You won’t get away with this,” I yelled. “Not you, and not your friends.”

The Queen settled herself on her gold throne once again. She curled her fingers around the arms of her chair and watched as the robot marched out of the room. A nasty smile spread across her face, and, for the first time, I saw the glint of her fangs as they pressed against her plump, red lips. Raven was right, she was a vampire, after all.

“You are like the usurper—too curious for your own good,” she said. The robot paused, allowing the Queen to finish speaking. “Know this—you will fail.” She shrugged one shoulder. “Since you are so curious, if you

want to know more, you should go to Urbis. My friends and I will be treating the populace to a party. The party to end all parties, in fact. There will be none like it.”

I shook my head, straining to keep my eyes on her as the robot kept a firm grip on my legs. “You won’t get away with this. The people won’t accept your rule—never again!”

“My people will do exactly as I tell them.”

“Your Majesty?” A man in dirty overalls, with bits of twig and leaf caught in his hair, came rushing into the throne room and fell to his knees. In his hands, he held a red rose. “You summoned me?”

“Show me my roses,” the Queen ordered. She held out a hand.

The gardener shuffled forwards on his knees, keeping his eyes on the floor. He was shaking as he held out the rose in his hands. “I live to serve you, Your Majesty.”

“You may live *if* you serve me,” the Queen replied. “I shall be the judge of that.”

“Of course, Your Majesty.”

The Queen held the rose to her nose and inhaled deeply. “A pleasant scent, and the color is good enough, I suppose. You shall live—for now. See that every rose in my garden is at least as good as this one, and you shall live a little longer.”

“Thank you, Your Majesty.” The gardener shuffled backward, unwilling to either get up off his knees or to look up.

I struggled on the robot’s shoulder again, but its grip was unrelenting. The Queen rose up and walked slowly toward us. She stopped in front of me, then held out the rose until it touched my nose.

“This one is for you, girl,” she said. Then she tucked the rose behind my ear. “Next time I see you, I shall add your unbeautiful head to my collection.”

The Queen turned her back and waved a hand. “Take her away.”



The robot dumped me on the ground and, a moment later, the gate slammed shut, and the key turned in the lock. I rubbed my bruised hip where it had

collided with the footpath in front of the Queen's Palace. Metal feet crunched on the gravel, getting softer as the robot moved away.

I sat up, with a quiet groan. The rose was still tucked behind my ear, and I examined it.

A perfect specimen, the rose was a rich, deep red, like blood, with a lingering scent. It was exactly the same type of rose that Alice had received every day for weeks. Now, I knew where they had come from. Not an admirer, after all. Jack had been right—the roses were from the Queen of Hearts, and they were a message: She intended to take Alice's head.

Our heads, I reminded myself. Both of our lives were in danger.

The sun beat down from overhead, and I squinted upward as I got to my feet.

In the distance, I heard the hourly tolling of the bells, and the ground jerked and shuddered as it moved. I imagined the whole of the city shifting around the Pinnacle clock.

The hover was a crumpled heap next to me. I sighed. Poor Chesh wouldn't see his invention in action. Not only that, I would have to travel back to the hospital by foot. I felt a sudden wave of weariness and leaned against the gate with a sigh.

It was a long walk back.

With the sun beating down on my head, I forced myself to put one foot in front of the other..

8TH SEPTEMBER



Alice closed her eyes as she took a sip of her tea. The cup rattled as she set it back on the saucer. I glanced at the vase of roses, still as red as the day they'd been left on the doorstep. We'd all assumed they were for Alice, but after receiving a rose of my own from the Queen, I wondered whether some, or all, of them might be for me.

"The Queen of Hearts?" Pearl asked, and I turned to find her standing in the doorway. Her hand was over her mouth, and her eyes wide. I knew she'd been standing there long enough to have heard at least some of the story I'd recounted to Alice.

I nodded.

"But...she's dead. You always said so, Mother," she said.

Alice hadn't opened her eyes. She was sitting very still—too still—and her hands were clasped so tightly on her lap that her knuckles were white.

"Mother?" Pearl asked.

I leaned forward to put my hand over Alice's hands clasped in front of her. Alice jerked away, standing abruptly and walking over to the fireplace so that her back was facing us.

"So I thought," Alice replied, her words clipped. "Nobody found her body, but I knew the Queen would not leave The Forge unless she had no choice." Alice rubbed her hands together, as though she was washing them, over and over again. "I was wrong," she whispered.

"Nobody could have foreseen this," I replied, getting up to take a few steps towards Alice. "Don't worry—"

Alice spun around, eyes wide. "Don't worry? You don't know what she'll do to me. You don't know what she'll do to everyone in this city. You

don't remember what it was like before—of course, you don't, you weren't even born. People lived in fear. Every word they spoke, every time they left the house, the Queen might execute them on a whim. She took people's heads because she didn't like their hats, or the lace on the trim of their shirt didn't please her eye, or the color of their jacket clashed with her own. You can't know what it's like to live in constant fear for your life."

I watched as her fingers worried at the trim of her shirt, and her eyes filled with tears.

"It has taken many years, but The Forge is changing—finally, changing. Now it may all have been for nothing. The people will be too frightened—too fearful for their lives—to admit the unbeautiful into the city. All these years, I've tried to rule the people of The Forge fairly, so that they could live free from her shadow. Now..."

Alice covered her face with her hands. Young Dinah purred, curling around Alice's legs to rub against her affectionately. Alice sobbed as she bent down to bring her cat into her arms and scratch her between the ears.

Holding Young Dinah in her arms seemed to settle Alice a little, although the moisture in her eyes remained.

I heard footsteps in the hall, and Gaia appeared in the doorway. "Something's happened?" she said, as her eyes found me. I nodded and pulled my sister aside to explain what had happened the previous day.

"So, we go to Urbis," Gaia said.

Alice looked up sharply, starting to shake her head.

"I agree," I said before Alice could voice her misgivings. "The Queen has people helping her. Their next move will be in Urbis. If we're going to stop the Queen from regaining control of The Forge, we need to go there."

"It might be a trick," Pearl murmured. She moved closer to Alice and put an arm around her mother. I noticed how similar they looked. There was no doubt that Pearl was Alice's natural daughter. There were years between them—noticeable by the fine lines around Alice's eyes and the few grey hairs that marked her temple—but otherwise, they were almost identical images of each other.

"We have to take the risk," I replied. "You should stay here with Mother. Gaia and I will go to Urbis."

Alice glanced at us, her eyes shifting from me to Gaia, and back again. "Alone?"

I exchanged a look with Gaia. She hesitated, and I saw a hint of sadness cross her face. Then her features settled into their familiar pattern of determination.

“Genie isn’t well enough to come,” she said. “He must remain at the hospital—for now, at least.”

Alice stared at me. “What about Raven?” she whispered. “Or Chesh?”

I shook my head. “Chesh is still in the hospital. Raven can only travel at night.” I took a deep breath and squeezed Gaia’s hand. “I think it must be the two of us.”

Alice’s face twisted into grief. She clutched Young Dinah until the cat meowed in protest. She reluctantly set the cat on the floor and came over to take my hands in both of her own.

“Take care, my darling girl. The Queen is dangerous—more dangerous than you know. You may have heard stories of her that seem silly—as her shadow retreated, some people talked of her as though she was a comical character. She was not. She was as dangerous as she was unpredictable.”

I nodded, but Alice spoke before I had the chance to respond. “You may not be my own blood, but you *are* my daughter. I’ve always thought of you that way, and I have always loved you. Come back to me.”

Tears welled in my own eyes as Alice took my face in her hands. “Promise me.”

I nodded, not trusting myself to say anything. Then Pearl was standing next to me, her head on my shoulder and her arm around my waist. “Come back, Ivy. I need my sister beside me. Especially if I’m going to learn how to be a nurse—I’ll need you to show me how to study.”

I started to giggle. “I’ll point out the library before I leave. I’m not sure you’ve ever set foot in it before.”

Pearl laughed, rolling her eyes, but I could tell that she was holding back tears.

“I’m proud of you both,” I whispered and put my arms around my mother and my twin sister, clutching them as though it might be the last time.



Raven held my face in his hands, his dark eyes studying my face as though committing it to memory.

“I have every intention of coming back,” I said, reaching up to pull his hands away. “I promise.”

“I wish I could come with you,” Raven said. He slouched slightly as he stood in front of me, as though defeated. He’d reluctantly agreed, as I’d known he would, that he could not accompany me to Urbis. Without the tunnels, he was trapped inside during the day. It would be too dangerous and too difficult for us to travel through the countryside by night.

He pressed a light kiss to my forehead, then I lifted onto my tiptoes to meet his lips with mine. I curled my arms around his neck, running my fingers over the feathery softness of his hair. I kissed him, taking note of the feeling of his hands on my hips, the flat lines of his chest as I pressed my body against it, the cool touch of the skin on his neck under my fingertips. I ran my hands over the wide planes of his shoulders, and along the lengths of his arms. I wanted to memorize every line and curve, every bulge and hollow. I wanted our kiss never to end, but in the end, it was I who pulled away so that I could study his face one last time.

“When do you leave?” Raven asked, cupping his hand behind my head so that his fingers tangled in my hair.

“Today. Now,” I replied. “When I leave you, I will meet Gaia at the hospital.”

“I would feel better if Genie could go with you, at least,” Raven murmured.

“He cannot,” I replied. “He needs to remain in the hospital.”

Raven sighed. “I would feel better if *someone* could accompany you.”

“We’ll be—”

“You’ve never left this city, Ivy,” Raven exclaimed, suddenly stepping away from me and turning away. He looked up at the portrait of his mother on the wall of his house. “Now, you’re going to travel to Urbis.”

“There has to be a first time for everything.”

Raven turned around, looking at me with an expression of astonishment. “Are you not at all afraid?”

I laughed, then walked toward him. I reached out to him, hooking my fingers into the edge of his vest and pulling him toward me until we were pressed against each other again. “Of course,” I said. “But I will have my sister with me. And it’s about time I saw more of the Twelve Kingdoms.”

Raven leaned forward and rested his forehead against mine. We were silent for a moment, aware of each other, without moving to disturb the sudden peace between us.

“Be aware of the Queen,” Raven cautioned. “She is dangerous. She is ruthless. She might rip out your throat at any time. Do not, under any circumstances, trust her.”

I squeezed Raven’s fingers. “I don’t. I won’t.”

He gave me a brief smile. “I don’t want to say this, but if you don’t leave now, you will not have enough daylight to make any distance today.”

“It’s not goodbye, Raven,” I whispered. “I’ll see you soon.”

I pressed a kiss to his lips, then pulled away and strode out of the door before my reluctance to leave him could betray me.



“Are you ready?”

Gaia was waiting for me in the lobby of the hospital. Her eyes were red, as though she’d been crying, but she stood with her head high and determined. I noticed she didn’t have her phoenix.

I nodded. “Have you said goodbye?”

Gaia gave me a curt nod. “We’ll be back,” she said. Then she linked her arm in mine as we made for the door.

“Wait,” I said. “I need to ask Chesh something before we leave.”

Gaia hesitated, then nodded, and followed me down the whitewashed corridor toward Chesh’s room.



I pulled the cover off the steam bike, and Gaia looked at it with a cautious look on her face.

“You’re serious,” she said.

“It’ll be faster than walking,” I replied. “I’ll drive. You can ride on the back.”

“You know how to drive this?”

I chuckled. “Yes, I do. Believe me. I’ve even taken Alice for a ride on it.” I kept to myself that Alice had only gotten onto the steam bike because

of the extreme urgency of the situation, and under much sufferance.

I handed Gaia one of the helmets and a set of goggles. She looked horrified.

“Once we start moving, you’ll be pleased to be wearing them.”

“Ivy, I don’t think—”

“Gaia, you can do what you like, but I’m not walking to Urbis,” I insisted.

Gaia sighed, resigned. I put on my helmet and goggles, then helped Gaia to fix her own.

“I look ridiculous,” she complained.

I rapped her helmet with my knuckles. “It’s a great disguise,” I said. “Nobody will know it’s us leaving the city.”

Gaia rolled her eyes, then pointed at the steam bike like it was some sort of monster that might swallow us in one gulp. “Show me how it’s done.”

I swung my leg over the bike, arranging my skirts so that they wouldn’t fly up when we started moving. Gaia watched for a moment, then settled herself behind me. I positioned her arms so that she was holding me around my waist, then kicked the bike into action.

I revved the engine, laughed at Gaia’s shriek, and started rolling out of the shed.

We sped through the city, and I couldn’t dampen the elation I felt to be moving—doing something—and finally leaving the city where I’d lived all my life. Even though I knew danger awaited us in Urbis, this felt right. I knew, deep in my bones, that this was exactly what we were supposed to be doing.

Alice and Pearl were waiting for us at the city gates, which stood open. I lifted a hand to acknowledge them as we rolled through the gates without slowing down.

Behind me, Gaia let out a *whoop* of excitement, and I felt the grin on my face. Outside of the city walls, we picked up speed as we followed the road that curled through the fields of green grass like a ribbon, into the unknown.



I saw the group of them long before we arrived. They were sitting underneath the shade of a large tree, whose buttress roots raised above the ground, like sprawling feet. Even from a distance, I couldn't take my eyes off them. As the road ran over the crest of a hill, then curved around across the rolling plain, I counted seven of them.

"There," Gaia shouted at me to be heard over the wind. I didn't need to look at her to know she was feeling the same way as me. The road we were on was taking us directly toward them, but even if there had been a turnoff, I would not have taken it.

Every fiber of my being drew me to the small group.

It wasn't until I was slowing the bike to a stop, that they turned to look at us.

I noticed the gold ring around their irises. I gasped, looking back at Gaia, though she didn't seem surprised. My eyes flicked from one to the other, barely noticing anything apart from the gold ring around their irises. These people weren't strangers. They were family.

At their invitation, Gaia and I dismounted and joined them underneath the tree. They shared their small picnic. One-by-one, they shared their stories.

Gaia's was by far the most interesting. She knew more about us than we knew about ourselves. She was the only one who'd seen our mother albeit in some kind of magical flashback. She'd seen her own birth, although she conceded the two babies she saw being born could have been any of us.

"I want to find her," Azia said. The others nodded. It seemed that this had started with our birth and our mother was a big part of what was going on now.

"Where were you heading?" The one called Deon asked..

"Urbis," I said. "The Queen of Hearts said that something was going to happen there."

"I hope you might consider coming with us instead," Deon said. "We were coming to The Forge, but since you're here, we should head to Oz instead. Something is happening in the Twelve Kingdoms."

"We're stronger together," Halia said, smiling at us with a friendly, open face. "Don't you feel it?"

I nodded, noticing it as soon as she'd said the words. "Do you think there are more of us in Oz?"

Deon nodded.

I glanced at Gaia, but I saw the agreement in her eyes before I even asked the question.

“Alright,” I said. “I suppose there’s no harm in taking a detour. Besides, I’ve always wanted to see Oz.”

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The Kingdom of Fairytales authors hope you enjoyed this new way of reading. We don't think that a series has ever been set with one chapter a day thought a whole year before and we hope we did it justice.

With this in mind, please leave a review, but when you do, remember that these books were always meant to be short breaks in your day and the blurb reflects that.

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THE KINGDOM OF FAIRYTALES TEAM

These books would not be written without a great many people. Here is our team:

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ABOUT J.A. ARMITAGE

J.A lives in a total fantasy world (because reality is boring right?) When she's not writing all the crazy fun in her head, she can be found eating cake, designing pretty pictures and hanging upside down from the tallest climbing frame in the local playground while her children look on in embarrassment. She's travelled the world working as everything from a banana picker in Australia to a Pantomime clown, has climbed to the top of Mount Kilimanjaro and the bottom of the Grand Canyon and once gave birth to a surrogate baby for a friend of hers.

She spends way too much time gossiping on facebook and if you want to be part of her Reading Army, where you'll get lots of freebies, exclusive sneak peeks and super secret sales, join up here

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Somehow she finds time to write.



ABOUT ZARA QUENTIN

Zara Quentin is a fantasy author, book lover and traveller. Raised in Adelaide, Australia, Zara grew up with a strong sense of adventure, which she inherited from her parents, who took her and her sister on trips to the United States, Europe, and Asia.

She also inherited a love of reading from her mother. Throughout her childhood she explored fictional places through books, and in particular, through fantasy novels. She'd turn the black and white text on the page into the colourful worlds of her imagination. Later, she put pen to paper and started creating her own.

After graduating from high school, Zara studied at the University of Adelaide and has lived in France, London, and Auckland, New Zealand. She is always determined to stimulate her imagination with as much travel as possible, spending time in Europe, the United States, southern Africa, Morocco, Peru, the Pacific and south-east Asia.

Zara now resides in Melbourne, Australia with her husband and three children. She is the author of the Airwoman series, and is currently working on a brand new project.